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# PUBLISHING

# A CURIOUS ARRANGEMENT

BEVERLEY BROWN INTERVIEWS  
THE SECRETARY OF THE  
BRITISH BOARD OF FILM CENSORS,  
JAMES FERMAN.



## INTRODUCTION

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Morrison, Home Secretary – and ex President of the BBFC – to the House of Commons, 1942.

*I freely admit that [the BBFC] is a curious arrangement, but the British have a habit of making curious arrangements work very well, and this works.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> *The Home Office Report of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship* (the Williams Report), London, HMSO, 1979.

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS after Herbert Morrison's defence of the institutional anomaly that was and is the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), the Williams Report<sup>2</sup> was still arguing – on different grounds and to different ends – that film censorship should be treated as 'a special case'. The anomaly is all the more striking in a Report that sought a single rationale to replace the conflicting claims of different bodies of law, with their competing criteria of obscenity and indecency.<sup>3</sup> As is by now well known, the Williams Report argued that offensiveness ought to be the main principle of intervention, demanding an end in particular to the 'unworkable' tendency to deprave and corrupt test of the Obscene Publications Act (OPA). The Report argued vigorously that no actual harm had been shown to arise from written material or still images. Yet film images were different:

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<sup>3</sup> See *ibid* and Geoffrey Robertson, *Obscenity: An Account of Censorship Laws and their Enforcement in England and Wales*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979.

*Film, in our view, is a uniquely powerful instrument: the close-up, fast cutting, the sophistication of modern make up and special effects techniques, the heightening effect of sound effects and music, all combine on the large screen to produce an impact which no other medium can create.<sup>4</sup>*

Ironically, this ‘impact’ argument relies broadly on the deprave-and-corrupt test which the Williams Committee sought to abandon. Acting (overacting?) on the BBFC’s evidence that film censorship was indeed necessary, the Committee reversed its overall administrative strategy (to decentralise and privatise control of pornographic materials) and instead recommended that the BBFC be replaced with a central state censorship body, to be called the Film Examining Board. To date, however, no such recommendation has been enacted, although the BBFC’s powers are being effectively enlarged in regard to video and club screenings (see below).

The BBFC undoubtedly has a curious history and status:<sup>5</sup> set up by the industry as an independent body to establish consistent national film protocols, its actual powers derive from a delegation of local authority responsibilities in the field of public health. The Cinematograph Acts of 1909 and 1952 require that no public cinematograph exhibition shall be given except in premises licensed for this purpose (on the analogy with public drinking houses and dance halls); these licensing conditions largely concerned the licensees’ observance of safety precautions – in the case of cinema, when nitrate stock was still widely used, this was primarily a matter of fire risk. Between 1909 and 1912, the local authority licensing powers over public film exhibition premises were gradually extended, via a number of court rulings (allowing, for instance, licensing conditions to require Lord’s Day observance) so as to include a local power of film censorship. There has never been an Act of Parliament formalising this local authority power nor one setting up a central state censorship body under direct control of the Home Office in its day-to-day running.

The BBFC itself was set up in 1913 by the hardware side of the industry, largely in response to the inconsistency in decision-making arising from the different local authorities’ varying exercise and interpretation of their censorship powers. The commercial need for some stability in censorship practice was, as it still is, supported by an appeal to the need for a special expertise in film culture. This was a sentiment apparently shared by the local authorities who, by 1923, were willing to acknowledge the Board as their representative by including in cinema licensing conditions the requirement that only BBFC-certified films be shown. The local authorities retained the final right to over-rule the Board on any individual decision in their area, a power which was rarely exercised until the early- to mid-1970s when, with the increasing split between a more lenient metropolitan authorities, particularly the Greater London Council, and the stricter district councils, the BBFC often found itself over-ruled in one direction or another. It was during this period that the Board’s current policy formulations began to appear, notably in the form of a *Monthly Report*<sup>6</sup> sent to all local authorities, detailing and explaining its certification and cutting decisions on all the films it passed.

What does a BBFC certificate mean for the film industry? It means at least that, in the opinion of the BBFC, the film does not contain any passages that would occasion prosecution. A BBFC certificate is not an

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<sup>4</sup> The Williams Report, op cit, para 12.10, p 145.

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed history, see ibid, Chapter 3 and Appendix 2, and Robertson, op cit.

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<sup>6</sup> Available in the BFI library and possibly from local authorities’ entertainments departments.

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<sup>7</sup> As of September 1982, these were:  
 U = Passed for general exhibition;  
 A = Passed for general exhibition, with parental guidance for the under-14s; AA = Passed as suitable only for 14+; X = Passed as suitable for 18+.  
 Certificate refused.

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<sup>8</sup> For an explanation of the application of this Act to the industry, see the BBFC's *Monthly Report (MR)*, number 2, 1979.

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absolute guarantee against prosecution, of course, but the Board's practice of taking legal advice – plus the spectre of an 'aiding and abetting' charge should they get it wrong – makes it pretty safe. Also – and perhaps just as important – it means that the film has fallen within one of the certification categories (U, A, AA, X)<sup>7</sup> with its obvious effects on the type of distribution a film receives (including television for, although the BBFC has nothing to do with TV censorship as such, at present cable TV will show only BBFC-certificated films). Up to now (see below), the calculation about distribution outlets would also have included the availability of club distribution for non-certificated films. In other words, films refused a certificate, or never submitted for certification at all, have had the option of whatever club facilities are available, and also the option of risking prosecution should the film fall foul of the law.

Avoiding prosecution is thus only one of the reasons for cutting a film. Films may also be cut according to the conventions surrounding certification categories (including non-certification). These conventions are described by the Board as concerning 'manners' rather than 'morals' to the extent that they designate 'acceptability'. However, since classification categories are also audience age-categories, questions of 'morals' do arise insofar as children are considered impressionable or subject to influence. Finally, a notion of what might be called 'family manners' also may dictate what parents would expect their children to see at the cinema or indeed what they would be prepared to sit through in the company of their children.

Cuts to secure certification for an X or lower category are made by film distributors – given the conditions of the industry, it is rarely filmmakers who are involved at this stage – acting upon the advice of the BBFC about which sequences will have to go. The actual cuts are not made by the Board itself, but usually by professional film editors employed by the distributors.

The BBFC thus combines, at one remove, local authority opinions on acceptability with a set of protocols for film classification. The third term of this relationship is the law itself, the base line over and above (and through) which the Board frames its policy. There are in fact a number of relevant laws. The Protection of Children Act (PCA),<sup>8</sup> introduced as a Private Members Bill in 1978, has been responsible for some of the more notorious recent cases, from *Pretty Baby* to *Not A Love Story* to *Taxi zum Klo* (from which footage of a German education film was, ironically, excised). The PCA is ostensibly a form of child labour law, prohibiting the showing of any indecent photograph which includes a child performer; unlike comparable legislation protecting animals, which allows out-takes and other evidence of ill-treatment, the PCA regards only the finished film. With respect to the PCA and other relevant legislation, the Board is essentially advisory, applying the law made by Parliament and the courts, its status as a buffer zone protecting the industry from prosecution constraining it functionally towards caution.

However, it would be too facile simply to present an anatomy of the historical/institutional 'curiousness' of the BBFC, its capacity to float

between local authority opinion, conventions of the industry, and the law, as if this were a permanent anomaly typifying the 'British way of life'. First of all, the BBFC's survival of the 1970s can be attributed to the emergence of a very coherent policy, combining its claims to filmic and legal expertise through a canny use of the terms of the Obscene Publications Act, finally extended to film in December 1977. Secondly, two recent technical/legal shifts threaten to disconcert this policy (*and* the Williams strategy) at the same time as they offer a potential enlargement of the BBFC's area of influence.

The Obscene Publications Act (1959 and 1964) set out the interaction of four central principles—a tendency-to-deprave-and-corrupt test of obscenity, a demand that this tendency be found among a significant proportion of its likely audience, a requirement that a work be taken as a whole, and a possible public good defence. The original 1959 Act specifically excluded film, which was left to the mercies of the conflicting battery of tests Williams complains of, in particular the literalness and arbitrariness of the indecency criterion. The arguments which the BBFC sought to raise about moral, criminal or social effects were often framed around 'eroticism' and were difficult to separate out from guidelines about 'explicitness' and principles of taste and manners. It was just this question of a public censor refusing or granting certification on matters of taste which provoked the mutinies of the local authorities in the 1970s.

The extension of the OPA to film in 1977 offered a resolution of this problem not only at the level of the law as such but in providing a vocabulary for framing an overall policy argument. On the one hand, it made context (the 'work as a whole') available as a framework in which to pass *more* material than before, material that would have been judged indecent on a frame-by-frame basis. On the other hand, 'context' is also the term by which the BBFC calculates whether or not a film 'may encourage the imitation or toleration of the anti-social behaviour portrayed',<sup>9</sup> i.e. its tendency to deprave and corrupt.

It is through the concept of context—with respect to both manners and morals—that questions of genre and fantasy, of narrative resolution and identification are made integral to policy. These are the terms in which passages may be judged 'gratuitous' or a film may be spoken of for instance as, a 'natural A, a children's adventure'. Where these are questions of manners and taste, and not harms, this would now be dealt with solely through classification<sup>10</sup> (which, as pointed out above, may include cuts for specific categories). Since classification decisions must combine judgments on acceptability with a view to the age of the likely audience, 'context' here is presumably doing double duty in some cases. But the OPA has above all provided a rationale for the BBFC's general shift of attention away from issues of propriety and towards violence, especially sexual violence. A clear example is the case of *Emmanuelle*. First cut with respect to indecency, the film was recalled in 1979 to censor the 'rape-condoning' sequence in the last reel. 'We no longer take rape scenes endorsed by the context of the film and this scene has now been

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<sup>9</sup> James Ferman, 'Censorship Today', *Films Illustrated*, volume 9, number 89, 1979, p 67; also available in the *All-Industry Annual Report*, 1979 and in *Film Directions*, volume 3, number 9, 1979.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p 63.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p 67.

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cut to conform with the OPA.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not this can be taken to mean that the film would actually have been prosecuted or convicted by a jury under the OPA, the argument functions to distinguish such cases from more detailed but less normalising rape scenes in other movies which have been passed because rape is treated as a crime and not condoned or sensationalised.

*Emmanuelle*: 'We no longer take rape scenes endorsed by the context of the film.'



Although the legal specification of the 'work as a whole' is the point of entry for the language of 'film culture', the OPA could have been used to do this in a different way. BBFC policy is notably different from the terms of reference established by obscenity trial procedures for literary texts.<sup>12</sup> While for both films and books there is an invocation of the repertoire of genre, oeuvre, narrative structure, and so on, in the case of literary texts, these categories are introduced as pertinent to a public good defence. This is the moment at which cultural or literary expertise may be drawn in to testify on the literary quality of a work. Any such conclusion is then counterposed to, without cancelling out, the work's obscenity: a work may, notoriously, be judged to be *both* obscene (in its effects on a likely audience) *and* in the public good (because of its intrinsic literary merit, which does not and, by the laws of evidence, cannot involve an assessment of audience effects). It is also common knowledge that this distinction tends to get blurred in practice, with literary experts becoming *de facto* if not *de jure* obscenity experts. This blurring may be described more precisely as a tendency to push the concept of the work as a whole, which belongs properly to the obscenity judgment ('if the effect, ... if taken as a whole, is such as to tend to deprave and cor-

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<sup>12</sup> See David Saunders, 'On Procedures, Legal and Otherwise, for Classifying Texts as Literary', *Southern Review* (Adelaide), forthcoming Summer 1982.

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rupt . . . ' – OPA) in the direction of the public good defence. It is not just that sexual descriptions may be mitigated or offset by some surrounding but alien context – there is an actual competition for the status of the sexual descriptions themselves, *either* obscene *or* literary. Most successfully, the problematic descriptions may be entirely deprived of their alleged effects through such literary machineries as allegorical reading,<sup>13</sup> by which the sexual part may be subsumed into the human whole.

In bypassing this option of a notional public good defence, the BBFC policy pushes these same or similar terms of 'cultural expertise' in a different direction, one that is in fact closer to the wording of the OPA itself, and which positively embraces the issue of audience effects. Does the work as a whole tend to deprave and corrupt? This is not posed, as a public good defence would indicate, primarily as a question of excellence, of filmic quality conceived as an intrinsic merit. Rather, more closely tied to content, what is asked is how, say, the narrative resolution will inflect the effective meaning of dubious passages for an audience which may be prone to literal imitation. Effects are not counterposed to or cancelled out by meaning. Is the villain punished? Is rape condoned? Or, taking up another opportunity afforded by the language of the OPA, can the term 'tendency' be construed, beyond even a single work as a whole, to include the possible effects of a whole genre of film? What is the effect of seeing ten rape-condoning films? Does a film succeed in presenting itself as a fantasy genre and hence diminish the possibility of re-enactment?

Williams suggests that BBFC's interpretation of 'tendency-to-deprave-and-corrupt' is rather more literal than current court interpretations,<sup>14</sup> yet his own discrepant treatment of film censorship testifies to the success of the argument.<sup>15</sup> Certain strategic considerations might bolster the BBFC case. First of all, many feminist arguments identify the whole class of pornographic representations of women as a causal factor in rape: were such a claim to be the basis of a censorship policy, far less material would get through than passes a literal-minded censor intent on literal imitation of sexual violence. Secondly, the overall principle, if not the actual recommendations, of the Williams Report could be taken to license a 'politics of the offended' potentially more restrictive than the current regime.

However, recent developments may well signal a new round of obscenity or obscenity-related trials that may even render these arguments obsolete. The 1981 Public Displays Act, restricting public visibility of offensive images, is certainly in line with the Williams overall policy. The 1982 Cinematograph (Amendments) Act also follows Williams in its attack on the 'scandal' of the sex film clubs. However, the film industry was not exactly welcoming to the Williams alternative of showing pornographic films (under certain regulatory controls) in some 'normal' cinemas. What has emerged is a piece of legislation extending local authorities' licensing controls over clubs and requiring *all* films for commercial exhibition to pass through the BBFC (using, presumably, an additional classification category to accommodate 'adult' films).

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

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<sup>14</sup> The Williams Report, *op cit.*, para 3.26, p 21.

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<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Robertson, 'The Future of Film Censorship', *British Journal of Law and Society*, volume 7, number 1, Summer 1980.

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Whether or not the BBFC can itself accommodate these films to its current policy rationale is another question.

The other development is the now proven success of the video market. The video industry's voluntary trade body, the British Videogram Association, is meeting with the BBFC to work out a voluntary classification code to be indicated on all video packaging and advertising. Intended to minimise consumer error in video selection, the policy anticipates the possibility of 'unclassifiable' films and trusts them to the OPA. However the seizure of *Driller Killer* and *I Spit On Your Grave* under the OPA also raises questions about the continuing viability of a work-as-a-whole criterion for a technology which gives the individual consumer control over the 'fast forward' and 'rewind' buttons.

Taken together, club control and video technology indicate that the concepts of public and private may be about to slip from formal philosophical distinction into more everyday, if less comfortable, attire. The 'publicness' of a cinema may come to be spoken of more in terms of such specific viewing conditions as seating arrangements, darkness, the prohibition on drinking in the auditorium, having to go out into the street at the end.... The 'private' space of video-viewing can be similarly itemised. Such a shift in argument would make public/private distinction less the natural ally of neo-liberal offensiveness criteria and more available for use within the terrain of claims about harms and effects. Geoffrey Robertson suggests how the argument might run:

*Video systems make nonsense of the categories so laboriously established by Williams; the test of 'fitness for public exhibition' is inappropriate to a medium designed for private exhibition, yet that medium can create, in intimate conditions which lack the distancing effects of public cinema screening, the very glorification of sexual violence which the Williams Committee wishes to censor.*<sup>16</sup>

The BBFC currently employs five examiners (three of whom are women) and sees an average of seven or eight films a week (though some of these, 'difficult cases', will be on view for the second or third time, when the Secretary and President may be called in as well). All the films are seen by two examiners together, there is an appeals procedure and, as described below, a variety of negotiations available between distributors, film editors and local authorities.

James Ferman himself joined the Board in 1975 after seventeen years of directing in television, as well as writing and editing a number of documentary films analysing social problems; his series of films for teachers, doctors and social workers, 'Drugs and Schoolchildren' is widely shown on the ILEA cable TV network. Just prior to joining the Board, he was a visiting lecturer at the Polytechnic of Central London for two years where, in conjunction with MIND, he instituted a series of courses and lectures on Community Mental Health.

*Screen: Every feature film, trailer and advertisement shown in public cinemas requires a certificate from the British Board of Film Censors. What does this mean in terms of your three-way relation with the trade, the local authorities and the criminal law?*

James Ferman: We said to the Williams Committee that our certificate meant essentially two things: first, that, to the best of our knowledge, the film was *legal* by every test of British law and, second, that, in the category in which we'd passed it and the form in which we'd passed it, we believed it would be *acceptable* to the vast majority of local authorities in Britain. Now Williams said that was rather a modest suggestion in that we do sometimes go beyond that in the sense that we will lead local authority opinion if we feel it right to do so, and use our influence even perhaps on the film industry. That's certainly true. But – I think that's because we care about getting it right. You see everybody at the Board loves movies, and I don't think any of us could do the job if we didn't because we see such dreadful films sometimes that, unless you really loved the good ones, and respected the medium as a whole, you could be so 'turned off' by the bad ones you would never want to see a film again. But, because we all do care, and care deeply, we will go to bat against a local authority that seems insensitive, or sometimes a film company that seems insensitive in the way they choose to handle their own material.

*Does determining a film's legality involve you in any official relations with the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), the police or Customs and Excise?*

We don't have official relations with any of them, but we are in touch from time to time on questions of general policy. We always try to be aware of where the law is, where magistrate's courts and juries are drawing the line. It's not just a matter of whether a particular film will actually be prosecuted. Lord Denning ruled in 1976<sup>17</sup> that no licensing authority might give its consent to that which is illegal. This means that we must interpret the law and apply it in every case where it does apply; and we will always, if we're in doubt, consult the best legal advice available.

I think it's important to add that the DPP's office will not concern itself with individual decisions of prior censorship. They say, quite rightly, that they must preserve their independent judgment because it's their task to decide whether or not to prosecute afterwards. But they have been quite helpful to us in recent years in clarifying the way the law applies in certain cases. For instance, the *Protection of Children Act* (1978) (PCA) came in just after we had received *Pretty Baby* and caused some extreme perplexity in the way it would apply.

*And how did this affect **Pretty Baby**?*

The main problem was a shot of the young girl reclining nude on a

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<sup>17</sup> Court of Appeal, 1976, *R v GLC ex parte R Blackburn* (on *The Language of Love*).

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couch, a reference to Bellocq's Storyville portraits. Now, the PCA does not equate indecency with nudity as such, but we felt that, particularly with the way the scene was lit, given the girl's youth and absence of pubic hair, that this was—however beautiful—an immodest shot. Louis Malle did try to find some outtakes with less detail but none were suitable, so the compromise that was worked out was to darken the shot, and thus obscure the lower half of her body.

*And the PCA, unlike the Obscene Publications Act (OPA), is concerned solely with the conditions of film-making?*

But it's based only on the evidence of what's on the screen in that you mustn't show an indecent photograph which includes a child. And it's only the photograph, it's not the words or the dramatic implication. In fact the PCA has nothing to do with the effect on the audience at all. It's not a deprave-and-corrupt test. It simply asks, 'is the child involved in an indecent photograph'. If an under-age child is sitting there playing patience while a naked couple are copulating on the sofa next to her—in the same frame—then the child is in an indecent photograph. Both *Taxi zum Klo* and *Taxi Driver* had to be trimmed to conform with this Act.

*Pretty Baby*: 'You mustn't show an indecent photograph which includes a child.'



*And the Obscene Publications Act as applied to films?*

1977 was a very crucial year in that it removed films from all the old common-law tests and brought them solely under the deprave-and-corrupt test of the OPA. The common-law test of indecency no longer applied. Under this test one frame of extreme genital nudity or an inde-

cent act portrayed in a film, however the context might justify it, could make the film indecent in the sense of offending the propriety of the average man. The jury could be asked to consider that same frame in isolation and there would be no way that the defence could plead context. We argued to the Home Office, and were supported unanimously by both the industry and the local authorities, that this was not a test which ought properly to apply in the modern world (except perhaps for the protection of children, which the 1978 PCA re-introduced).

It has generally been thought that the OPA refers only to pornography, but here the DPP offered us an important clarification, in that it's not just hard-core pornography, it's anything that may be depraving and corrupting to a significant proportion of those who are likely to see it. It includes the advocacy of drug-taking, the portrayal of horror or violence as a 'turn-on'. In other words, there may be something which is not pornographic in the common sense of the term, in that no genital organs are on display on the screen, but the wicked behaviour portrayed is presented as a 'turn on', an encouragement to behave in an anti-social or seriously harmful manner.

*How do you negotiate censorship decisions with the local authorities and the trade?*

Since the Williams Report was published, most of the local authorities have stopped involving themselves in censorship decisions, but the situation was different when I joined the Board in 1975. Censorship was extremely controversial. The Board was going through a difficult period largely as a result of a number of contentious films which came out in the early 1970s – *Straw Dogs*, *Last Tango*, *Emmanuelle*, *The Devils* . . . . And there had of course been a sudden trend for sex films, beginning with sex education films in the early 1970s and going on to soft porn films of which *Emmanuelle* is the most obvious example. This meant that the local authorities suddenly found themselves involved in a very controversial business, while the newspapers found that there was a lot of good copy in censorship. The film industry in its turn – to be fair to the newspapers – often traded on that, because controversy was good for the box office. We were asked to consider issuing reports which would brief local authorities on controversial films, but I felt that to limit the reports in this way would involve making invidious choices and that instead the local authorities should be briefed on film censorship in general, on the whole range of the problem. This is why our *Monthly Reports* (1975-79) set out to discuss every film which came to us. During the course of the Williams Committee's deliberations we did realise that the purpose of the Reports had been served, but the Committee would have been loath to see an end of them while they were still meeting because they found it useful to have a running commentary on the work and rationale of the Board; it made their job easier because they didn't have to see so many films.



*Tell me about classification. What are these categories doing? How fixed are they for a start?*

I think that consistency is very important. Audiences and film companies want to know that certain kinds of material will be in certain categories. On the whole, parents don't have much time to think very hard about these things, they just want a general feeling of security that if a film is in a certain category, they know roughly the parameters of that category. In practice, the U isn't actually a positive recommendation for children, it just means 'not unsuitable'. We gave it to *Man of Marble*, for instance, and when *Man of Iron* came out the Academy cinema rang us up and begged us not to give it a U since *Man of Marble* had been full of kids at the weekend, rushing about the cinema, they were so bored. So there is a case for disentangling a positive recommendation for children from an unrestricted category. The video industry would be interested because they're going to be selling educational videos which they won't want to mix up with children's films.

*And this is where you use the informal guidelines first worked out when indecency was still the main criterion—and presumably modified since then? What would the guidelines for language be?*

In *Hooper*, for instance, the distributors came back, after we'd given it an AA certificate, asking for an A, and we said they'd have to make a general reduction in the quantity of lavatorial expletives. We never accept sexual expletives at A. There's a bit more bad language in the AA category than there was five years ago, but we try to judge each case on its merits. The films that have had a heavy use of bad language or four-letter words in AA have all been films that have something to say to teenagers. *Fame* is an example. We couldn't cut the language in *Fame*. It was used only at moments of anger or despair or rage, in the case of the black male dancer who had a literacy problem or was very frustrated. Richard Pryor's concert films, which are marvellous, have just so much language as part of the act and he talks so frankly about sexual matters, that it's more comfortable in the X category. We don't cut language at all simply on grounds of manners. We prefer to classify it.

*What about sexuality and nudity in categories below X?*

We don't try to keep from children the fact that sex exists, we see people being loving to each other and we have talk about sex but not terribly explicit, not more than the end-of-the-pier innuendo of the *Carry On* films. *Benny Hill*, on the contrary, indicates how far TV will go in early-evening comedy. The sort of thing he will say from time to time may be more comfortable in AA than A but, on the whole, if it's good humoured, we tend to take it at A.

*What about depictions of homosexuality?*

I think we're more relaxed about homosexuality than we were ten years ago, as society is. Tom Robinson's 'Glad to Be Gay' was in *The Secret Policeman's Ball* (AA). I think teenagers know about the existence of homosexuality. It depends how frankly it's portrayed. The new, glossy film *Making Love*, about a wife who discovers that her husband is gay, was on the whole treated as we would have treated a heterosexual situation. The reason it was X was because of a scene where one man takes the trousers off another, and then a bed scene in which you see two men in a post-coital embrace, and it's quite clear that sex has taken place. This was the kind of thing which just didn't seem right at AA. Maybe we took it a little more seriously because it was two men, but on the whole I think we're pretty even-handed about it. *Nijinsky* was AA and that had a pretty explicit homosexual relationship (though I don't think you saw Diaghilev and Nijinsky in bed together). We'd never cut anything for that reason, it's really a matter of classification.



*Making Love*: 'On the whole treated as we would have treated a heterosexual situation.'

*But some things would be absolutely out of children's films?*

Imitable techniques, criminal and violent, we will not pass for children on the whole – foul blows in fights – we don't like heroes behaving badly in kids' films in ways that are likely to be copied. If a hero won a fight by doing something disgraceful, on the whole we wouldn't pass that for pre-teenage children. Breaking or entering or stealing cars or things like that – if it were a readily copiable technique, we wouldn't show it to children. Home-made weapons are quite worrying, and indeed even at the X level we are sometimes unhappy with an easily copied home-made weapon.

*You also refer to various experts over certain films?*

It's no secret that we consulted a couple of child psychiatrists on *Jaws*. In fact one of them told us that the film would worry adults far more than children.

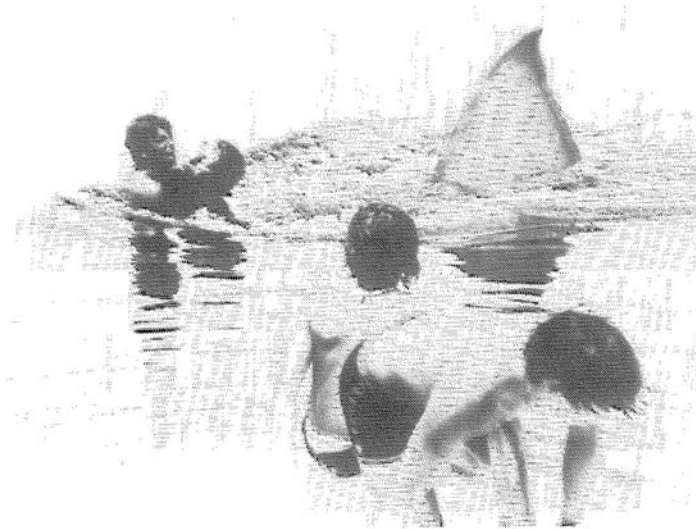
*In the **Monthly Report**<sup>18</sup> there's an argument that *Jaws* might be less fear-inducing because of its realism, its grounding in everyday recognisable life, as opposed to the 'nightmarish' quality of *Alien*.*

On the other hand, Laurie Taylor has made the point that the fact that something is scriptable into real life could in itself be quite worrying. The 'everydayness' of certain kinds of things has a normalising effect. If you can present a rape in an everyday situation it makes it far more realistic and more copiable, easier to incorporate into your subconscious, if you can associate it with images of your own everyday life. It's an argument that cuts both ways. This is also where the element of genre comes in. It's important that you can recognise a film as a fantasy. A Western, for instance, is a recognisable genre and you know the conventions, so you can take far more violence, precisely because of the aesthetic distance this establishes.

*This seems to be reflected in the **Report's** use of the word 'appropriateness', for instance, to a Western, to make more sense of the idea of 'gratuitous' sex or violence. Does this mean the Board would encourage sticking to set genres?*

Genre is a useful but limited concept; after all they rise and fall. What is new or original this year can be recognised later as establishing a new genre. And genres need revitalising from time to time, usually by the injection of new kinds of realism, as Peckinpah did in *The Wild Bunch*.

On balance, I think that what was reassuring about *Jaws* was not its realism but the fact that it was actually a very healthy framework. The society was very closely observed, the central characters were very heroic, and it had an epic quality of Man versus Beast, one of the great myths of childhood. It was a very moral film. The sheriff was like Gary



Cooper in *High Noon*, fighting the local corruption, and the film was on his side all the way.

*This echoes the argument about the 'film as a whole', i.e. the terms of reference of the OPA, but used to frame an argument about classification and children.*

Which side is the film on? This is a very important question. As is the ending when you classify films for children; a reassuring ending can change a whole film. There suddenly came a trend in the 1970s for a 'downbeat' ending, the horror film that ends with a threat: 'They might have come through it this time, but shark is still lurking', that somehow the monsters will turn round and get you, out there in the stalls, next; that evil still lives in the world. People were intended to leave the cinemas shaken and disquieted. And I think you can't do that to children, leave them disoriented and disturbed. Parents would be quite right to protest.

*Doesn't the same argument get extended beyond fear to 'lifestyle endorsement', for instance drug-taking?*

We've tried to keep drug-taking out of the pre-teenage categories (U and A). We've allowed pot-smoking to be seen in AA films and drugs to be referred to in AA films, but we've tried to keep the U and A categories absolutely pure because on the whole pre-teenage kids don't have the information to cope with that sort of message. We don't want them to be gradually softened up to the idea that there are drugs in society and sometimes nice people use them.

*So it's an extension of the deprave-and-corrupt logic?*

Yes.

*And the question of manners then isn't just a matter of reflecting existing standards.*

We must remember that film is a teaching medium. In fact, the process is cyclical because the media reflect society and, in reflecting it, they offer back, usually as glamourised images, models for behaviour. Look at James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause*: what he adopted were certain familiar styles – the windcheater, the slouch – which then became emblematic for a whole generation. People learn much more from the media than they learn from schools.

*And the same thing applies to sexual morality?*

I think there's no doubt that the permissive generation became glamourised through the media, which showed free and easy promiscuity as not only the norm but as fun.

*So you are saying that, for violence and for sex, certain sorts of narrative resolutions – 'crime doesn't pay' or 'the promiscuous life ends in tears' – makes more things showable along the way?*

Well, it can be easier to deal with. We can't deny that we live in a very violent world, more social violence at least, if less militaristic violence (though we are involved in two wars at the moment). But certainly it's easier to deal with the real and disturbing violence of the world if one can show that there's a tragic dimension to it, that people actually get hurt, that there is a price to be paid. If that's the way it's shown, then we may allow it to go much further in explicitness. If it's glamourised or trivialised, then it's much more likely to become a model.

*To turn to the more technical side of how the classification and cutting negotiations work –*

We will always try to offer a category uncut, that is, we try to classify the film as it comes to us and if the film is exactly between two categories these days we will always try, and I think we started shortly after I joined the Board, to say to a company, 'Look, if you want it uncut, it will be this category because one or two scenes will not fit into the lower category but if, for your own commercial reasons, you want to reach the wider, younger audience, then you'll have to modify the film. The decision is yours'.

*But in the case of **The Deerhunter** this wasn't an offer you were prepared to make?*

We were in the unusual position in that we saw *The Deerhunter* almost first in the whole world and were very impressed with it, I think more impressed than some of the critics when it finally opened. I think that the distribution company in Britain was a bit doubtful, thought it was over long (over three hours), and rather violent, and said, 'Surely a war story like that is a good teenage story. If we were to cut it, could we get it down to AA and what would we have to cut?' To which we said, 'We're not in the business of cutting movies for you, for your own commercial reasons, and in the case of this particular film, we really think it's disgraceful that you should be tinkering with something which we think is so effective as it is, and you have a duty to the medium not to muck it about.'

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<sup>19</sup> For a longer story, see Ferman, op cit, p 63.

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*Then it wasn't specifically about the violence of the Russian roulette sequences?*

Not at all. They simply wanted to shorten it and to use censorship as an excuse. We said at the time we thought it was an award-winning film and a very important statement about the post-Vietnam demoralisation of America. Apparently the same battle was going on in Hollywood, and our stand over here was used by the producers of the film as extra muscle to stop the film being tinkered around with.<sup>19</sup>



*The Deerhunter*: 'Our stand was used by the producers . . . to stop the film being tinkered around with.'

*But in what sense can you actually refuse to allow a cut? Could you have refused to certify it at all?*

I think it's fair to say we can use our influence, and we do have influence, but it doesn't go beyond that because the film is always the property of

the commercial enterprise that backs it or buys it. But we can refuse to help them do something which we disapprove of on artistic grounds. And we would also expect them to make good cuts, to pay attention to things like the rhythm of the editing. If occasionally they've deleted what we've asked them to but done it technically rather clumsily, we'll send it back to them and ask if they can improve it. I like to feel that in the cinema these days you never notice any cuts. We know the editors that most of the companies employ and we like to keep a fairly trusting relationship with them.

*What form would your instructions for deletions take?*

If cuts are required for the category they want, then we send them a list of what the cuts would have to be. These would be quite detailed but we never measure frames, we just describe the action that has to be deleted, or we will say 'reduce' in the case of violence. They have a certain discretion, but if we want to be specific we can be. We may say of a fight that they must lose certain foul blows which are described.

*And who is 'they'? Obviously the Board doesn't make cuts itself. But is it always the distributors? You mentioned dealing directly with the film-maker on *Pretty Baby*.*

I wish there were more film-makers involved. I wish there were more English films, but most of the films are from abroad and taken over by English distributors. Occasionally it would be an English film – Derek Jarman did the small (eight seconds) cut<sup>20</sup> required in *Jubilee* and was very understanding – but very rarely is there any cutting in English films because on the whole English film-makers know what the standards are in this country. This is obviously one of the effects of just knowing that the Board exists, particularly after we began publishing the *Reports*. Tony Garnett in *Prostitute* was an exceptional case in that it was his first film as a director and he really wasn't familiar with where we would draw the line – he admitted that he'd hardly ever seen the kind of sex films that go round in either the clubs or the public cinema.

*And what are these guidelines on sexual positions and nudity in X films?*

Partly we're in the hands of what the local authorities expect to see in the general cinema. With nudity we have seen bare breasts at A but not shot close-up or emphasised, and not normally in a sexual context. If a woman's breasts were clearly visible in a scene where a couple were in bed together this would probably make it AA. On the whole we'd accept male and female full frontal nudity at AA, but not at A, and certainly not in a sexual context. The massage parlour scene in *Prostitute* indicates where we generally draw the line at X, and here there simply is a convention that's grown up in this country that genital detail in a sex scene is normally shown only in cinema clubs. Charles Stewart,

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<sup>20</sup> A scene combining orgasm and strangulation with a plastic bag.

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probably the best ciné-verité cameraman in Britain, had shot virtually the whole of that scene in one take, and all in vision, whereas a more experienced feature cameraman would probably have tilted up slightly so that the masturbatory detail was happening slightly below frame. The point would still have been clear. It wasn't what was going on that we worried about – we don't cut reaction shots, for instance – it was actually the erection shown prominently in frame, and dominating the frame at some points when the camera went in close.

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<sup>21</sup> *MR*, number 3, 1979.

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<sup>22</sup> The Williams Report, para 12.24, p 149.

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*Are cuts every made on the basis of 'lingering too long' on particular details, as the **Monthly Report** puts it at one point<sup>21</sup>?*

Williams was slightly baffled by this sort of quantitative reduction which has been a traditional part of the Board's approach, he speaks of 'minute cuts . . . as if the third twitch of the buttocks changed the quality of what had already been allowed twice'<sup>22</sup>. As I said to him afterwards, the Board has been moving away from these habits in recent years towards a more analytical approach which treats the work as a whole and assesses the contribution of the parts accordingly. But I would still defend our traditional procedures. There comes a point when quantity in these matters can become quality. Although in first-class works the instinctive good taste of the artist usually prevents indulging in unnecessary exploitative detail, excess has become traditional recently in the exploitation side of the industry.

*Is there a difference in acceptability between male and female nudity?*

We do try to be even-handed, but I think that an unfortunate tradition has built up that one can be much more explicit in depicting female nudity than male nudity. Women take great exception to this, and I don't blame them. There are certain states in America that actually define visual pornography as anything that includes an erect penis or heterosexual penetration or oral sex with an erect penis, while nothing that a woman might be doing by herself or with another woman counts as hard-core pornography – which to me is absolutely extraordinary.

*And all these are arguments purely about acceptability?*

Purely. I don't think such visuals are harmful in any way. It's simply that, as a rule, if a scene were to include an erect penis being masturbated in vision, we would not regard it as something to be normally accepted in the public cinema, although public taste could change. There have been exceptions: *WR-Mysteries of the Organism* was one. That whacky woman who took plaster casts of the erections of famous men was part of the whole surrealistic tone of a quite delightful comedy, and the scene would have changed its meaning by having the visuals removed. But in *Prostitute* the scene didn't change through being 40-odd seconds shorter. It was still



clear what was going on, the tone was the same.

A more recent exception was the Canadian documentary *Not A Love Story*, which was an attempt by two Canadian women to come to grips with the reality of pornography, with what it is and what it does, both to participants and to the likely audience. It was essential to the case the film was making that we should see these images for ourselves, the full range of images, and the sort of context in which they would be presented. This was a serious film with something important to say, and we took the best legal advice we could get to see if we could pass the film uncut. The OPA allows a defence of context, so most of the film was all right on those grounds. On the other hand, there was one very brief shot of child pornography which had to go, since the PCA allows no defence

*Maitresse*: 'Perhaps the tolerance level of many supposed libertarians isn't as high as they would like to think.'



on these grounds. Fortunately, there was no commentary on the shot, so its removal was no problem.

*In the Monthly Report's account of refusing a BBFC certificate to a film involving sadomasochism, a reference is made to the possibility of treating this subject 'with some seriousness as a genuine if dangerous element in human psychology'.<sup>23</sup> How would you recognise such a 'serious' attempt?*

Essentially it's a matter of avoiding showing for its own sake, and taking pleasure in showing, the actual process involved. This can affect classification as well, for instance a penis nailed to a plank in *Maitresse*. In that film, which was a serious film, we said that at the X level (as opposed to the club version) you can let us know what is being done, but you don't have to make us watch it while it is actually happening. You can show the effects and the circumstances without dwelling on the process.

*And is this because of the deprave-and-corrupt criterion?*

It could be, but in the case of *Maitresse* we just tried to think of the general effect that this might have on an audience who wouldn't be predisposed to want to see it. It's interesting that we thought this a rather better film than I think a lot of the critics did. Some of the critics who are normally quite libertarian, when they actually watched it in the uncut club version, were so 'turned off' by it that it was pretty widely panned. I was rather surprised. Perhaps the tolerance level of many supposed libertarians isn't as high as they would like to think.

With *Last Tango*, again the Board tried to apply the conventions of what it is acceptable to show, although we pointed out the irony that it was a far more moral film than many of its outraged protestors realised at the time.<sup>24</sup> And, of course, a very good film. Equally, with *Ai No Corrida*, we felt that this was a serious film of a very high quality but that it couldn't be shown uncut in a public cinema in the mid-1970s. Instead we recommended that it be made available in its original form, to self-selected audiences, through a club arrangement.

*So you're saying that the existence of art film clubs or sex film clubs has in various cases actually made it possible to determine boundaries of acceptability in the public cinema<sup>25</sup> while still making uncertificated films available to a club audience?*

There is a tradition in this country that, on the whole, we restrict seriously offensive or potentially offensive sexual material by confining it to clubs or semi-private situations. This is the British solution. It's not a solution which any other country has developed, but if we can accommodate the club licensing system to that tradition then on the whole it will prove more acceptable, and clubs and public cinemas could still retain their character as different social spaces.

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<sup>23</sup> *MR*, number 3, 1979 – the film was *Secrets of a Nymphomaniac*.

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<sup>24</sup> '... the film's highly moral point that impersonal sex is impossible, self-destructive and a contradiction in terms', Lord Harlech, 'Film Censorship in Britain – Past, Present and Future', *International Conference on the Classification and Regulation of Cinema Films*, London, March 22-26 1982, p 10.

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<sup>25</sup> In 1979 *Captain Lust and the Pirate Women* had 27 minutes, 30 seconds cut, when the distributors decided to go for an X certificate, rather than its originally intended club distribution. *MR*, number 3, 1979.

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*What are these changes in the club licensing system?*

The clubs are now coming under control through the Cinematograph (Amendment) Bill, which will require every club which operates for private gain to be licensed by the local authority and to show only films certificated by the BBFC or the local authority. It won't cover film societies, that is, any non-commercial premises like the NFT, which will still be able to show uncensored films. But it will cover the art club circuit if the cinema is operating for private gain.

*How much does this reflect the dilemmas around films like **Ai No Corrida**?*

It's in fact largely because of the Williams Committee's recommendations on the bogus sex clubs. Those clubs, with their instant membership, have been thumbing their noses at the law and the licensing system, taking their chances with police raids and in the process causing a great deal of unnecessary public expense, plus the problem of the police having to catch them up only after the offence. It's a very chancy thing to raid a club, see what you catch, knowing there are other prints in the cellar or in the restaurant next door. With video, it's even easier for the determined criminal. And for that reason, I think the police and the Home Office and the Attorney-General's department (which covers the DPP) all feel that a system of pre-vetting is a more sensible and less expensive system. Most other countries have legalised (under various kinds of constraints) the kinds of films that clubs are showing and I think in a modern age we would have to come up with some system of regulation rather than prohibition, except of course, for the really depraving and corrupting.

*And will there be an additional adult restricted category over and above the X, such as the 18R recommended by Williams to handle these kinds of films? He was proposing it in the context of a certain 'de-segregation' of the club audience, proposing that some public cinemas should have the facility to show 18R material.*

Later this year we shall have to work out a set of guidelines for the clubs, with possibly an additional category, which is what I think is likely to happen. But only if the film industry and the local authorities and the Home Office (which keeps a watching brief on it) are happy with it. When the Williams Committee suggested the 18R category for designated public cinemas there was, surprisingly, as much resistance from the film industry as from the local authorities, with in general the metropolitan authorities for it and the district councils against it. But the film industry was unhappy to have that sort of club material finding its way into the public cinema. They thought it would harm the reputation of the industry, drag its respectability down.

I think the Williams Committee did make one fundamental mistake. They decided to say, 'Here is a problem, which we have looked at inten-

sively and extensively. If we were starting again, how would we propose a logical solution?' But no country or government can ever start totally from scratch and scrap everything – you have to build on what works and what is accepted. This is what is at stake in the whole question of manners – there are so many almost incidental, unstated but implied, ways in which tradition affects public psychology.

But I think the Board's view has always been, like that of the Williams Committee, that there was room in our society for a kind of film which would not be widely shown but shown only to those who seek it out. Provided that it did not encroach on the consciousness of those who had no wish to know about it, through indecent or disturbing advertising – advertising is very important<sup>26</sup>, the ads for *Driller Killer* on video are very worrying, and advertising also affects how people come to see the film or video itself – and provided it was not depraving or corrupting.

*But if the Williams Report were fully implemented, the deprave-and-corrupt test would be abandoned. For that matter, the BBFC would be the effective arbiter on the potential offensiveness of films.*

We want to *apply* the law, we don't want to *be* the law. Williams wanted to turn us into a statutory authority and give us absolute dictatorial powers, with no second guessing from the local authorities. We said to them that the flexibility and inefficiency of the local authority option was healthy in a democracy. We are only fallible human beings: critics make mistakes, high court judges like Lord Denning can make mistakes, everybody can make mistakes, and you must have a system which allows for second-guessing by other people.

And I think, to be fair, when Williams argued that nobody wished to see the deprave-and-corrupt test preserved, this was a less than frank statement, because we had in fact argued very strongly that it ought to be. I think there is still a need, and the Williams Report accepted this, for adult censorship. In paragraph 12.10 they argue very strongly in the context of the cinema for the depraving and corrupting capacity of certain kinds of entertainment – though they don't actually use the words 'deprave and corrupt'.<sup>27</sup> In fact it's almost impossible to balance the two halves of the Williams report. I think that they wrote the first half before they had really finished the film section, and when they got to the film section, they threw out all their thinking and said, 'Wait a minute – film is so powerful, we will treat film as a special case.' Well, it's not a special case, it's simply a more extreme form of dramatic communication.

*But the definition of offensiveness in the Williams Report depends on an analogy with action, with real and private acts being made public.*

They had already decided that offensiveness was to be the only criterion. I said to them afterwards, 'Would you say that to exploit the rape of a nine-year-old child on screen – even if it were simulated and the child

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<sup>26</sup> In 1979 the BBFC and the ASA joined the Society of Film Distributors' Advertising Committee. Also see Mandy Merck and Sue Clayton, 'Obvious Nastiness?', *Spare Rib*, number 106, May 1981, pp 26-27.

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<sup>27</sup> '... some of the film sequences ... seemed to have no purpose or justification other than to reinforce or sell the idea that it can be highly pleasurable to inflict injury ... the extreme vividness ... of film may make it harder ... for some who are attracted to sadistic material to tell the difference between fantasy and reality.' Williams Report, para 12.10, p 145.

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played by a sixteen-year-old actress—was OK but perhaps offensive? Don't you think its unacceptability lies in what it actually does to an audience?'

*Then you're using deprave-and-corrupt in the literal sense?*

No, I'm using it in the legal sense. In fact, I think it's fair to say that no film made before 1970 had a serious tendency to deprave and corrupt by today's standards. But since then there has been a tendency to indulge in an exploitation of evil for its own sake: 'We are now going to show you the nastiest, most unpleasant thing you've ever seen—and if this isn't strong enough for you, next week we'll show you something even stronger,' putting the idea into people's minds, that is, actually inciting them to find evil attractive, saying, 'We want to put you in the position of the rapist, we want you to watch this from the standpoint of a man who is enjoying participating in it.'

*Is this an analogy with incitement to race hatred?*

The problem is that the way films work is not necessarily a direct incitement. The law talks of a *tendency* to deprave and corrupt, which is exactly what it is. There's very little evidence that if you see one rape film, it will incite you to rape, but if you see two, six, ten? Out of 402 films in 1976 we had 58 which included scenes of on-screen rape. Some were quite serious films, but most were exploitation, trying to make the audience enjoy the rape as male spectators. I don't think you can say that any *one* of those films is a direct incitement, but they gradually erode the taboo against it, they gradually teach a male audience—at least American porno films do—that women don't really mind rape, that they will respond to it as a liberating experience. I think it's a tendency, the cumulative impact of a whole genre of film.

There's also a lot of evidence<sup>28</sup> that the violent act—and this comes round to the semiological approach that the film audience completes the meaning, as the reader completes the meaning of a text—will be 'read' differently by different audiences. The Milgram equipment<sup>29</sup> at Harvard was adapted to test responses to visual stimuli. It was found, for instance, that if, when they showed a fight, the victim was shown suffering in close-up, most normal people would give fewer electric shocks afterwards. With a test-group from a New England reform school (which is like our borstals), they found the subjects giving greater shocks; some of them were actually 'turned on' by making people suffer. Similarly, in a *Newsweek* programme on pornography, Gene Abel, the New York researcher, found that in showing rape images to normal men, measuring their physiological sexual response, the erotic content was the main factor and the physical response decreased when the violence factor was increased. With convicted rapists, on the other hand, it was the other way around; and this is the problem with these recent 'slasher' films—which are in fact all heavily censored in Britain, more than the critics

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Brody, *Screen Violence and Film Censorship*, Home Office Research Study No 40, London, HMSO, 1977.

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<sup>29</sup> The original Milgram experiments were designed to test the effects of 'following orders' by seeing the point at which subjects would refuse to obey commands to administer increasing electric shocks to people whose (simulated) reactions they could see.

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notice—that violence and rape itself is presented as a 'turn on'.

And, again I think we must remember that films are not isolated experiences, people go to the cinema repeatedly. The generation 16 to 25 used to go a couple of times a month, or used to when they had money. Now they're hiring video, and seeing far worse things, with the added factor that they don't even have to see the 'film as a whole'—they can just skip the boring dialogue and spool through to the rape or the brutality, and see it again and again.

*Is it always a literal image of a rape which you think would have these cumulative effects? What about certain ways of representing women?*

I don't think you can generalise. I think the decision can only be made by people who are sensitive to the way films work, who know films very well, and even then there's no guarantee. You have to be fully literate in film imagery and film communication.

Interview conducted by Beverley Brown, June 9 and 14, 1982. Thanks to Chris Auty and Geoffrey Robertson for information and advice. The stills do not illustrate scenes cut from the films mentioned.

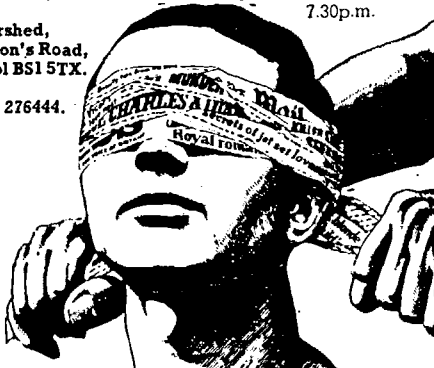
## THE CENSORSHIP DEBATES

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# 'NOT A LOVE STORY'

## SUSAN BARROWCLOUGH EXAMINES THE FILM AND ITS ASSUMPTIONS.

### I. A Motion Picture About Pornography

THE CONTROVERSY about *Not A Love Story*—*A Motion Picture About Pornography* and its problems with the Canadian censors arrived in Britain a year before the film itself. This documentary, produced by the National Film Board of Canada and distributed in the UK by Contemporary Films, had its commercial opening in London in June of this year. Whatever it achieves in the campaign against pornography, it has certainly provoked debate as a film.

*Not A Love Story* takes the form of a guided tour through the sex emporia of New York's 42nd Street peep shows, live sex acts, videotape booths, cinemas and the photographic studies of *Hustler* magazine. This footage is intercut by interviews with those involved in the industry (publishers, performers, photographers, salesmen) and with some of the groups and individuals who have written and lobbied against it (Women Against Violence in Film and Media, Men Against Violence, Robin Morgan, Kate Millet, Susan Griffin). Fact confirms opinion via a liberal scattering of statistical evidence representing the trade as an eight billion dollar business now larger, we are told, than the music and conventional film industries combined. Our on-camera guides are the film-maker, Bonnie Klein, and a stripper, Linda Lee Tracey, whose comic Little Red Riding Hood act is shown at the beginning of the film.

*Not A Love Story* was produced by Studio D of the Canadian National Film Board's English language production branch. Founded in 1974, Studio D has provided a forum for women film-makers to bring their perspectives to social issues and concerns. These films have opened up

Wednesday, August 25, 1982

VARIETY

23

# BOSTON REALLY LOVES "NOT A LOVE STORY"



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a motion picture about  
**PORNOGRAPHY**

Produced by the National Film Board of Canada Directed by Bonnie Sherman and Peter F. Johnston and John G. Quadri Films Incorporated

Gross earnings: the Boston success of *Not A Love Story* advertised in *Variety*.



new subject matter for the NFB, while remaining within the constraints of realist narrative documentary. Bonnie Klein is based in this studio and has made a number of films including *Patricia's Moving Picture* about the mother of a large family who tries to re-enter the job market. But in some respects *Not A Love Story* breaks with the time-honoured NFB documentary style. The participation of the film-maker in the film itself inscribes, rather than effaces, the authorial voice. The undisguised point of view and personalised storyline present a polemic akin to investigative journalism rather than the 'balanced' account one has come to expect from the NFB's housestyle and history. Yet, at the same time, the film is faithful to the Board's 40 year old traditions: realist narrative, *cinéma vérité*, an underlying moral didacticism, claim and counter-claim all sewn up and closed with a reassuring voice-over.

Here the film-makers' decision to shoot most of the pornographic material in New York and not in their own backyard, where much of the same exists, is an interesting one. Why did they ignore the luxuriant pornographic culture of Toronto's Yonge Street, or Montreal's Saint Catherine Street, and instead go for wickedness south of the border? One wonders whether the NFB's federal government status and its charter, '... to initiate ... the production ... of films in the national interest ... to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations ...', has anything to do with this choice.

*Not A Love Story's* inclusion of pornographic material has blocked its commercial exhibition in some Canadian cities. There the public controversy over the film has continued unabated since its completion a year ago. Two provincial Boards, Ontario and Saskatchewan, refused to give it a certificate. (Both are already notorious for rigid censorship. In Ontario *Last Tango in Paris* and *Tin Drum* were shown in cut versions and *Pretty Baby* has never shown commercially there.) The only public screening of *Not A Love Story* in Toronto was in fact its premiere at the 1981 Toronto Film Festival. Unadvertised, private, invitation-only screenings are permitted in Ontario, provided they are conducted, in the words of the censors, 'in an atmosphere of concern'.

The Canadian press reaction to the film was split between male and female critics. The latter mostly defended it as 'an overwhelming statement ... compassionate, sincere'<sup>1</sup>, while the former either attacked it as 'bourgeois feminist fascism'<sup>2</sup>, or indulged in male testimonials of guilt and shame: 'I have never been as profoundly moved and frighteningly disturbed about myself and about all men ... uncertain about my assumptions, my own personal morality'<sup>3</sup>. The saturation press coverage on the film helps to explain the enormous audiences it has secured wherever it has been shown. It is certainly one of the NFB's biggest ever successes. In Montreal, for example, its English language run has continued for eight months (at the time of writing) with over 100,000 admissions. In the United States it is only the second ever NFB feature-length documentary to find commercial distribution: it opened in New York in June. The British Board of Film Censors gave it an X certificate, after cutting a shot of a woman who appeared to be under-age and whose

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<sup>1</sup> Joy Tataryn, *The Manitoban*, November 2, 1981.

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<sup>2</sup> Jay Scott, *Globe and Mail*, September 7, 1981.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Benesh, *Ottawa Citizen*, January 28, 1982.

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inclusion could have contravened the Child Protection Act. The film ran commercially in London's Paris Pullman, an art cinema, for six weeks with once weekly women-only screenings (an unusual and technically difficult departure for a commercial cinema). It has also been shown to educational and womens' groups, and subsequently by other cinemas.

The viewpoint of *Not A Love Story* is unambiguous: the depiction of women in pornography and its increasing use of violence are degrading to all women and both reflect and create hatred and violence to all women. Painful though it may be, the film argues, if we are to know what to do about pornography we need to know what it is – knowledge is power. The film-makers have therefore taken the key decision to include some of the pornographic images they condemn, unlike much of the critical literature on the subject which has often omitted either images or descriptions of them, assuming a knowledge that is often absent. As suitable stills are unavailable, below are my descriptions of some images used in the film:

*Image: A nude woman lies horizontally, cross-wise to the camera. Her mouth is gagged with two golf balls tied by a leather strip. Her wrists are tied above her with chains and a leather band is attached around her torso. A partially nude man moves over her struggling body. He plucks out some of her pubic hairs, bites her breasts and roughly kisses her mouth.*

*Image: The nude torso of a woman is being fed into a metal meat grinder. Only her legs and rump remain; under the grinder lies a plate of ground red meat.*

*Image: In a small cubicle a woman dressed in a body stocking sits holding a telephone in her right hand. A male customer in a cubicle facing hers, puts 25 cents into a slot and a metal shutter rises. The woman looks at the man, talks to him on the telephone, takes her clothing off and opens her legs. She touches herself and asks the man what he would like to do to her. After approximately sixty seconds the metal shutter slowly lowers, obscuring the woman. He puts another coin in the slot and the shutter rises once more.*

These images were taken from a videotape, the cover of *Hustler* magazine and a live peepshow. *Not A Love Story* compounds all such images into one pornography. Yet it could be argued that we are in fact shown a number of separate pornographies. The videotape extract shows a particular sexual activity acted out for the camera; it belongs to a sub-genre of pornographic film that concentrates on sado-masochism. The magazine cover does not even depict a sexual activity, but rather refers to a male<sup>4</sup> desire to eliminate 'the female head', so to speak, and just be left with the sex. It speaks more about men than it does about women and could be interpreted as a self-critical parody playing on men's fear of thinking women, rather than what they'd actually like to do with women. The peepshow example involves another activity, in which the customer sees, is seen by and talks with a live woman behaving in a sexually receptive manner. The addition of language changes it from a passive relation-

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4. Such a masculinisation of the spectator/consumer is, of course, ultimately inadequate. Here it is used deliberately to address the film's analysis of men's pleasure in pornography. A fuller account of the subject would require the examination of women's spectatorship and use of sexually arousing representations.

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- <sup>5</sup> Ruby Rich, 'Anti-Porn: Soft Issue, Hard World', *The Village Voice*, July 20, 1982, p 16.
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ship of voyeurism and implicates the participant in a more active way. The customer chooses to pay for the pleasure of looking and talking (and probably masturbating), rather than watching a film, a striptease or even, for example, engaging a prostitute and adding the experience of physical contact. Each of these choices is for a distinct type of pornographic experience.

One of the main inadequacies of *Not A Love Story*'s approach to its subject is that it confuses all such pornographies into one. Yet various pornographies operate differently, cater to different audiences and elicit different sexual responses. The relationship to sex acts on celluloid is very different to that of the physical proximity of a peep show. Degrees of passivity/activity and of distance are involved, of reality and illusion. *Not A Love Story* fails to point out these important differences.

If the film fails to distinguish among pornographies, it also fails to negotiate an unimplicated point of view from which to show us the pornographic extracts. The examples given above and other live show extracts are at times shot from the point of view of the live audience and then from that of the performer. But, in the long sequence of the shuttered peep show, for example, the camera is behind the back of the male customer/viewer, so that we are peeping over the shoulder of the person watching. We are even given a privileged point of view of the woman 'by zooming in for a close-up . . . thereby presenting us with an intimate view not even available to the real-life customer'.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the first image described (the videotape), the camera shoots through the open door of the small viewing room and we are given a tiny fragment of what one imagines is a ten minute tape, without knowing where we are in its running time, whether it simply consists of repeated sex acts, or whether the violence is located within some sort of narrative. The difficulty such material presents to film-makers may account for their reticence to engage in the subject up to now. Nevertheless, the choices elected in *Not A Love Story* seem ill-considered, to say the least. The use of freeze frame, slow motion or even that of a second camera might have disturbed our viewing relationship to its images. Anne-Claire Poirier's technique in the NFB's fiction film *Scream from Silence* (1979), in which she acknowledged the problem and showed herself and her editor at the editing table discussing the possible responses to fictional sequences of rape, might have provided another tactic. Instead, the audience of *Not A Love Story* is often placed not even in the position of an ordinary porn consumer, but in that of privilege, with the 'spicy bits' picked out for us, or in the position of voyeurs to the voyeur.

This unintended voyeurism is doubly ironic in a feminist film, especially one in whose particular documentary approach and narrative construction imposes an unequivocal interpretation of its subject. At the outset our two guides provide widely differing perspectives on the subject. The film-maker clearly states her intentions: 'On the streets around me women's bodies are offered for fantasy, everywhere illusions are for sale. I need to understand what happens behind these closed doors and how it affects my own life.' For her part, Linda Lee Tracey is

comfortable with her job as a stripper, arguing that her performances 'parody what I'm supposed to be'. Yet she goes along for the ride, for reasons which are never made clear. However, after the film's intensely emotional interviews and its descent into the hard-core life, Tracey's position changes, and the two perspectives converge.



Linda Lee Tracey's striptease: a 'parody' of 'what I'm supposed to be'.

As Ruby Rich has pointed out in her review of the film<sup>6</sup>, *Not A Love Story* possesses all the religious connotations of a biblical parable. The missionary (Klein) weaves her way through the sinners (the anonymous punters), the purveyors of sin (publishers, photographers, capitalists), those who are tempted to sin for economic gain (performers and models), and the virtuous who campaign against sin (Griffin, Morgan, the demonstrators). To complete the allegory, the sinner (Tracey) sees the error of her ways, converts, and quits the business. Despite the smattering of statistics, the two polarities of empathy and outrage move the film out of the realm of analysis and philosophy and into the discourse of religious homily, in which the forces of good and evil wage war.

The way the film is shot confirms and defines this point of view. The sex magazine publisher is filmed in the kitsch surroundings of a sleazy nightclub, while by contrast the feminists Morgan and Griffin are framed respectively in the cosy surroundings of home and grassy nature. The camera constantly returns to the film-maker, so that her reaction shots – smiling approval or grimacing disapproval – impose an intrusive interpretation on the audience. We are forced into an *us* and *them* dichotomy which militates against any opening up of the subject and which manipulates us into a process of moral identification. The possibility that 'us' may at times include 'them' is never even considered.

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

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Converging perspectives: Tracey (left) and film-maker Klein.

## II. Some Assumptions About Pornography

*Not A Love Story* shares with much of the feminist discourse on pornography a social psychology which makes a set of questionable assumptions about the male viewer, i.e. that –

1. His fantasy is one and the same as the pornographic fantasy.
2. Pornographic images directly influence behaviour: sexuality flows continuously from fantasy to enactment.
3. There is one undifferentiated male viewer: all men react the same way, and all identify with the male point of view.

I don't wish to disprove these but merely to show that they *are* contestable assumptions. They all beg the key question: who *is* the male viewer?

The feminist discourse on pornography which asserts that it directly influences male behaviour blurs the distinction between representation and the real. Film pornography is neither real nor a perception of the real. Instead it is a representation of fantasy in images. The question then to be asked is not its relationship to sexual practice, but to sexual fantasy. The male viewer's fantasies are likely to be abstract, vague, ill-defined and buried in the subconscious. Does the pornographer have it in his power to step into this hazy domain and colonise it? Does he become a 'terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerilla'<sup>7</sup> as Angela Carter suggests, constructing the sexual day dreams of viewers with simple, immediate and figurative images? This power to colonise is what the anti-pornographic argument assumes. Yet might it not also be true that sexual fantasy is personal and to some degree resistant or at least selective when faced with colonisation? Alternatively, one could ask, on the premise that fantasy is a part of all our lives, whether those who seek out pornography are in some way deficient in producing fantasies.

As with any film genre, the western or the musical for example, the

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<sup>7</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, London, Virago, 1979, p 21.

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pornographic film has a limited scenario and thematic. In order to retain an audience which will return again and again, the industry must continually ring the changes on the genre and compete successfully with mainstream films that are cutting into their markets by including more explicit sex scenes. Faced with these pressures, pornography must innovate constantly in order to hold and create different specialised audiences. These audiences are distinct. All pornographic film, contrary to the impression given in *Not A Love Story*, does not centre on sado-masochism, although this is certainly a widely available sub-genre. While it may be true that an iconography of whips, chains and leather has become more dominant in recent years, it has never completely displaced boas, furs and fishnet. If violent scenarios or images have proliferated, this may have more to do with keeping ahead of mainstream films, and with winning new specialised audiences, than with representing and reflecting a general degradation of sexual mores. Demand in this business does not necessarily create supply, but neither does supply create demand.

The pornographer does not necessarily give the viewer what he wants: hence the ceaseless proliferation of pornographies and the competitive search by the consumer for images which approximate to his private fantasy and stimulate it. The customer *may* find what he wants, but he may not. The question remains: how much does the viewer therefore own and retain his fantasies when confronted by these images? How much do they correspond to his own or differ from them? Do they confirm, change, question or bleach out his own private dream-world? To assume his fantasies are completely colonised is to assume that *all* spectators, not just porn viewers, are wholly susceptible to *any* representation.

Much feminist writing on pornography implies a hierarchy of sexual experience based on moral judgements of what constitutes acceptable activity. This hierarchy assumes that the common denominator of all sexual experience must be an *activity* between *two* adults. (*Not a Love Story* even assumes this activity to be heterosexual, excluding as it does all mention of homosexuality and gay porn.) This hierarchy privileges activity over passivity, 'real' sexual relations over voyeuristic ones. Furthermore, the argument that pornographic fantasy is transmitted into behaviour assumes that people's sexuality is continuous, with fantasy always influencing behaviour. Yet it is possible that the pornographic experience is an authentic, autonomous sexual activity for some people; that it is unrelated to their other sexual activities, or even that it is their sole sexual activity. This possibility becomes plausible if we look at three characteristics of the pornographic film: (a) the role of money exchange, (b) the nature of the voyeuristic relation to the image, and (c) the role of symbolism and objectification in pornographic film.

The exchange of money is never absent in the pornographic experience. Every film, tape or magazine has to be bought and paid for; in the shuttered peep show payment intrudes once a minute. This exchange could be a crucial one in defining and enclosing the pornographic experience, in sealing it off from other sexual activities which do

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<sup>8</sup>. See 'Special Report: Cableporn', *American Film* vol 7, no 5, March 1982.

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not involve money exchange. Payment also makes possible a symbolic, fantasised transgression of society's consensus about the morally acceptable and normal. As a consumer, the film-goer finds security in temporary ownership of an image he can never actually possess. Without doing anything but paying, he has crossed the demarcation line separating his own life from the imaginary one of the broken taboo. Surely this payment to enjoy an imaginary transgression is integral to the pornographic experience.

One development which may change this experience is the recent proliferation of home video and 'cable-porn' in the United States (a factor which neither *Not A Love Story* nor the Williams Report chose to apprehend).<sup>8</sup> This type of domestic viewing displaces direct payment at the moment of consumption and possibly the sense of transgression which that transaction underlines. Furthermore, conventional home viewing patterns offer the prospect of men and women watching pornography together, rather than the paradigmatic isolated man. Nor need domestic pornography be sealed off from other sexual activities, in the way that the solitary trip to the cinema now is. Consequently, the boundary between pornographic experience and other sexual experience – now fixed by exchange, by privacy – will perhaps shift again. Finally, the effect of a 'flow' of available televisual material may undercut the unique status of pornographic video in a way which may be analogous to the entry of films like *Dressed to Kill* (unmarked as 'porn') into mainstream cinemas. The signalling of film type, the place where it is seen and its general ambiance are important determinants to the ways in which such representations are read.

In buying his ticket to watch a pornographic film, the customer chooses a sexual experience which places him in an anonymous, separate and passive relationship to the sexual activity performed for him. Beyond looking, this experience demands no physical activity whatsoever from the viewer. However many times the woman on the screen invites the viewer to enter her, he cannot. She is untouchable and unobtainable and there perhaps lies the source of pleasure. It is different and separate from an active sexual experience.

The problem with much feminist discourse on pornography is its underlying tendency to deny the different practices which compose our sexualities, one of them of them being voyeurism. If voyeurism satisfies our curiosity about the 'private' sexuality of others, the viewer is either apprehending it and enjoying it precisely because it is unreal (the next best thing to watching his real neighbours), or is actually confusing the representation of fantasy with reality. The latter case is untenable, in part because pornography's cinematic simplicity works against this confusion of representation with the real.

One of the factors that could define the pornographic film and the voyeuristic experience it engenders as a separate and autonomous sexual activity is the way such films are made and their characteristic symbolism and objectification. The assumption that the viewer is so influenced by watching a pornographic film that he acts upon these influ-

ences in his active sex life, depends upon another assumption that the films are *capable* of creating such an illusion of reality that the viewer is carried along into this imaginary world and an identificatory process.

However, many videotapes and short films available have no story whatsoever. Some are continuous loops, others are mere repetitions of sex acts. Even the feature length hard-core film is marked by its obvious use of sexual archetypes – super stud, nymphomaniac, etc. – (ie. recognisably distinct from the real) and repetition. Unlike the more cinematically sophisticated commercial narrative film, the pornographic feature usually has the slimmest of storylines (e.g. woman goes to psychiatrist worried by her sexual dreams – leading to numerous flash-backs) which merely provide the pretext for infinite numbers and variations of sex acts to be shown. The minimal plot is acted out by characters who have only one dimension – their sexual one – and are given the minimum of dialogue. They are made very cheaply, quickly and shoddily and the limited use of sets, decors and locations provide little or no social context to either recognise or identify with. At this point the anti-pornography lobby would say yes, such films reduce people to mere objects! But precisely this impoverishment of plot, narrative, character or social context may leave the viewer outside the film's activities, with little to identify with apart from the questionable locus of gender. Rather than sameness (a reflection of real sexual practices), it could be the otherness (so different from the real) which gives pleasure. Is it possible that the viewer's separateness from such different and formalised representations of sexual relations affords pleasure precisely because it bears no real relation to his own behaviour?

In common with *Not A Love Story*, many analyses of pornography assume that the male viewer always identifies with the male in the film and that all male viewers have exactly the same viewing experience. It is true that what little cinematic artifice does go into pornographic film is to be found in partisan *male* camera viewpoints and in the direct to camera female look. This could be described as an *attempt* to construct the audience as one and as male. However, the assumption that this actually works is to deny the potential viewings informed by subjectivity and sexual ambiguity.

While the male viewer may want to lose himself in front of the images of an illusory symbolic world, uncluttered by the hassles of everyday sexuality, he brings his sexuality with him into the cinema. His own sexual make-up, his history, his experiences, his frustrations, his own peculiar desires and fantasies intrude upon what he sees. He inserts himself into and completes the images in a personal way perhaps very different to those of the man next to him in the dark. Rather than one reading, the audience of any given porn movie may produce multiple readings of what is, after all, the fantasy offered by still another – the film text. These could range from acceptance to rejection, disappointment or excitement, self-confirmation or self-criticism.

Within these multiple readings is the possibility that the individual male spectator takes the part not of the male, but of the female. Contrary



to the assumption that the male uses pornography to confirm and celebrate his gender's sexual activity and dominance, is the possibility of his pleasure in identifying with a 'feminine' passivity or subordination. Whose part does he take when, as often occurs in such representations, the woman is the sexually active, dominant or aggressive partner? Does the passive role offer fantasy relief from the strains of phallic performance?

Another experience which problematises theories of pornography based on similarity and identification is the interest and attraction of otherness, rather than sameness: the middle-aged man watching younger men, the sexually inactive watching the active, the individual watching the archetypal. It may be that his gaze falls, not on the female genitals (which he may be accustomed to seeing elsewhere) but on the male, and that the chief part of his pleasure, which he may disown subsequently, is homoerotic rather than heterosexual. This ambiguity pornography permits.

In its assertions about pornography, *Not A Love Story* represses not only discussion of this specialised class of representation (if indeed it is), but of representation itself. What are the connections between representations of sexuality and sexual activity, between fantasy and enactment? The ways meanings are produced and consumed – and their relation to other aspects of sexed and sexual behaviour – demand an analysis which cannot be conducted within a moral parable of the lost sheep reclaimed from the Big Bad Wolf.

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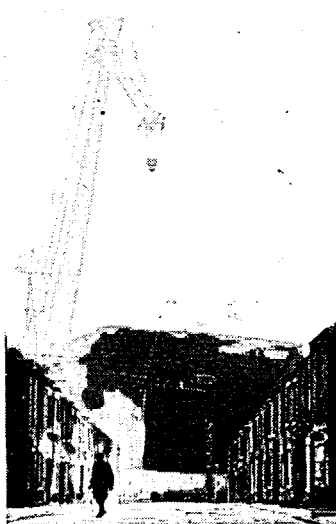
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# THE BODY AS EVIDENCE

## A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE PORNOGRAPHY PROBLEMATIC BY LESLEY STERN.

PORNOGRAPHY IS CURRENTLY a hot feminist issue. In the United States the anti-porn movement is one of the best organised and best funded campaigns in movement history. In Britain and Australia pornography has focused activity and lively debate in a way unparalleled by other issues in recent years. It might be argued that pornography oppresses women, but it has also ironically served to save feminism from falling apart by providing a target, a rallying point. The proliferation of activity, speech and writing about pornography is perhaps more revealing than pornography itself.

Before examining what pornography itself reveals, I want to question why it has been given such priority and to consider the implications of this for the future of feminism. This means charting the development of the feminist interest in pornography, but also situating the Women's Movement within a broader political spectrum. The relation of feminist film criticism to pornography will be located within this framework. How we might look at pornography, like the question of what pornography reveals, will be held in suspense. This might mean that, after much preamble, pornography changes its look so that the questions to do with looking and revealing may be inflected differently. But that remains to be seen.

### The Explicit and the Illicit

One explanation often given for opposing pornography is that it has recently flourished as a counter-attack on feminism:

*The increase of porn in mass media is also part of the backlash against feminism – along with the assault on abortion rights, the trashing of feminist presses, the packaging of the 'Total Woman'. Laura Lederer, coordinator of Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM), explained, 'Enough women have been rejecting the traditional role of subordination to men to cause a crisis in the collective male ego.' The women's*

*movement, following the civil rights campaign, proved a devastating blow to the status quo. Also, feminism has surfaced at a time of declining economic and political stature. In the last decade, American men have lost job security, self-esteem, and have been confronted with massive guilt. They feel angry, threatened, impotent. Women are accessible targets.<sup>1</sup>*

Conversely, I would argue that no backlash has simply erupted as a kind of pathological outburst against the power of the Women's Movement. Rather, the power of the movement has been gradually reduced, in part by fairly systematic economic, political and legal manoeuvres, and in part because feminism has not had the tools to develop a systematic counter strategy. Along with lack of centralisation there has existed the principle of an autonomous Women's Movement which has had paradoxical effects, particularly where it has meant autonomy from 'male politics', meaning divisions between the Left and Right, and where the enemy has been taken as patriarchy, patriarchy approximating to something like 'the collective male ego'. At a time when it is imperative for feminism to analyse its own location within a broader political spectrum, and for its own survival to scrutinise the logic of the Right, to take pornography as the prime target seems short sighted and strategically inappropriate. This is mainly because in so far as pornography is taken as 'evidence' (of a backlash, of patriarchy flexing its muscles) the power that the campaign seems to have conferred on the movement is based on circumstantial evidence, on the power of showing, and actually deflects from an analysis of the workings of power at a state and bureaucratic level.

It seems to me that the proliferation of writings, speech and political organisation against pornography is not a simple response to an actual increase in visibility but to that very visibility itself. It is a response to something that *is* evident, that is noticeable, and it arrived at precisely the time when the Women's Movement was losing energy and coherent organisation. Because pornography is there, can be pointed to, shown, because it appears to be explicit in a way that sexism is usually not, it has been seized upon as a target. It is a short step from saying pornography shows explicit sex to saying that it is explicitly sexist, but it is a sidestep that involves many ramifications.

The appeal of pornography—its appeal as an object to focus on, a subject to write and agitate about—would seem to have to do with its visibility, its being-thereness, its explicitness. There is a certain paradox in this, for one of the conditions of porn, one of the things that establishes it as a category, is that it be illicit. However, the illicit can go together with the explicit. And in pornography the conjunction is important—not so much for the purposes of definition but for an understanding of its appeal, both for consumers and critics. Most writings on the subject begin by saying that pornography is difficult to define, but here are some attempts:

*We take it that, as almost everyone understands the term, a pornographic representation is one that combines two features: it has a certain function or*

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Miner, 'Fantasies and Nightmares: the Red-Blooded Media', *Jump Cut* 26, pp 48-50. This issue also includes an annotated bibliography on Women and Pornography, pp 56-60.

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<sup>2</sup> The Home Office Report of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship, London, HMSO, 1979, p 103.

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<sup>3</sup> Miner op cit.

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<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Coward, 'Sexual Violence and Sexuality', *Feminist Review* 11, Summer 1982, p 11.

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Longino, 'Pornography, Oppression and Freedom: A Closer Look', in Laura Lederer (ed), *Take Back the Night*, New York, William Morrow and Co, 1980.

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intention, to arouse its audience sexually, and also has a certain content, explicit representations of sexual material (organs, postures, activity, etc).<sup>2</sup>

*Pornography is the representation of sexual images, often including ridicule and violence, which degrades human beings for the purpose of entertaining or selling products.*

To which is added an important corollary:

*Pornography is more about the exercise of power than about the expression of sex.*<sup>3</sup>

*Pornography is a regime of representations of sex. By this I mean that pornography is not generally an act but representations – writings, films, photos, videos. These show bodies (usually naked) in a sexualised way, or people involved in the sex act, according to certain conventions that mean they are interpreted as pornographic by society.*<sup>4</sup>

*Material that explicitly represents or describes degrading and abusive sexual behaviour so as to endorse and/or recommend the behaviour.*<sup>5</sup>

There are obvious (and important) differences between these understandings of what pornography is *about*. But there appears to be general agreement that pornography is representation, and that it *shows* sexual activity in an explicit way. I draw attention to this common ground, to the most neutral and commonsensical notion, not to neutralise either pornography itself, or the different attitudes towards it, but as a reminder of the provocation that pornography proffers. It is because it is both so visible and so invisible – explicit and illicit – that it has become at once something to hit out at and something to be uncovered. The hitting out may take the form of throwing bricks through sex shop windows or it may be manifested in a call for censorship. The uncovering may take the form of feminist tours through 42nd Street in New York or it may involve a more theoretical exercise that uncovers pornography not as a singular entity but as a ubiquitous phenomenon. One way or another, the target can be rendered *visible*. In pornography sex is made explicit. In those societies, including our own, where pornography is such a hot feminist issue, sexism is more often than not not explicit. Two nots make for a double negative and a double knot. I think there's a real danger of feminism tying itself up in that knot and delivering itself up as a package to be despatched to a destination unknown – not by some omniscient patriarchy but by the body politic.

The knot involves reducing sexism to sex. Sex and sexism are not two distinct, mutually exclusive, categories. Sexism refers to oppression on the grounds of sex, but here 'sex' means gender, more specifically, female gender. What feminist struggles have provoked is an awareness that resistance to sexism must involve an understanding of the relation between sex and sexism which goes beyond merely harnessing the two terms together; the complexities of the relation are understood by problematising the two terms. Thus it has been necessary firstly to understand 'sex' not just as sexual activity, not just as gender, but also as

to abandon any further search for a definition covering all cases and concentrate instead on attempting to delineate the terms of its specificity. In other words, a discussion of pornography at any but the most general level calls for a model which will define and describe the conditions of its social and historical variability.

Among feminists, pornography is a much-discussed and often highly-charged issue, and it has also inspired a good deal of political activity. In this context, two questions call for consideration. Firstly, why is pornography of interest to feminists? And secondly – and relatedly – is a feminist analysis of pornography possible? I will address the first question by taking up the general definition of pornography discussed above. Full consideration of the second, however, demands – and must also – a consideration of the political apparatus in

sexuality, sexual identity, learned through, and constructed by, institutions like the family, education, the workplace; and secondly to understand 'sexism' not just as an attitude manifest in individual behaviour, but as produced and sustained within material conditions. If sexuality is shaped, constructed by the social, it is also shaped differently for women and men, structured in terms of power, and sustained through policies, legislation and practices which serve to oppress women. However, it is not just woman as body that is oppressed, and neither is the body politic unified and monolithic – there are a diversity of practices which produce a number of notions of woman. Power is articulated, it is not an immutable force, and where there is power there is resistance. An understanding of the relation between sex and sexism has been developed not just on the level of the conceptual, but through struggle – for in order to effect any transformation it has been necessary to demonstrate how and why sexism operates, how and why it is oppressive. For sexism is not self-evident, certainly not to those who stand to gain, and frequently not to those who stand to lose (consciousness-raising is testimony to this).

### A Body of Evidence

To illustrate this I will sketch a hypothetical scenario which, as a story, bears no relation to pornography, but in so far as it has to do with methodology bears upon the pornography issue. A feminist group attacks a company because there are no women mechanics employed, arguing that this constitutes sexism, sustains the oppression of women. The management demands evidence, asking how can we be accused of

sexism towards women who aren't even here? How can we be oppressing women when no one here is female? The management's argument rests with there being no body, no body of evidence. The first stage in the feminist campaign would be to refuse this mode of arguing, this resort to the phenomenological. It is not woman as oppressed body that needs to be produced; what needs to be demonstrated is that the sexism is constituted by ideas *about* woman. Furthermore, the struggle is likely to incorporate material practices such as retraining, equal opportunity legislation, childcare, and maternity leave.

I have used this example to suggest that the relation between sex and sexism pivots upon the construction of sexual difference and the articulation of power and resistance across a range of practices. Any reduction of sexism to sex, to either sexual activity or gender seems to me a retrogressive step for feminism. The privileging of pornography as a site of oppression seems to me retrogressive precisely because it operates upon such a reduction. In using explicit sex to demonstrate explicit sexism the anti-porn movement locates itself within the discursive framework of pornography itself. Where pornography is posed as an embodiment of sexism, pornography itself comes to represent a body of evidence. The body is reinstated. Attacking, or even getting rid of the evidence, even assuming this evidence to be male power, does not deal with the way power is articulated not just between a class of men and a class of women but through and across a variety of social practices. The reduction of sexism to sex also involves a displacement. The gaze at porn involves turning a blind eye to the way in which various notions of woman, various sexualities, are constructed and promoted in areas such as the family, within the work place, through health, education, legal practices and other regimes of representation.

So far I have suggested that the feminist interest in porn is new and relatively unitary. Nevertheless, it proceeds from distinct analytic perspectives which demand scrutiny. The feminist interest in pornography can be given a history, but I want to question that history as an automatic progression, the logical outcome of some original insight. By tracing various connections and disjunctions it might be possible to indicate where the porn trail may be leading, and in the process to examine how power has been articulated within the Women's Movement itself.

*Why was 'violence against women' (campaigns against rape, battering and incest) superseded by 'women against pornography' (campaigns against pornographic visual representation)?*

The question is asked in *Diary of a Conference*, a documentation of the discussion and planning for the conference, 'Toward a Politics of Sexuality' held at Barnard College, New York, April 1982. It both suggests the way in which links have been made in feminist campaigns between male violence and pornography, and also shows a shifting focus, an historical change.

The early work on rape was extremely important to the Women's

Movement for a number of reasons. The campaigns established significant feminist support structures such as rape crisis centres, at the same time as agitating for legislative reform. Yet the struggle was not just about challenging the law but also, importantly, about challenging institutional procedures—judicial, police, medical, welfare, psychiatric. Media campaigns were also extended beyond agitation for ‘equal rights’ to question, very publicly, any idea of a natural balance between men and women which could be achieved and maintained through legislating for equality. And this question raised further implications leading to alternative theoretical formulations and practices. It could be assumed that if there is not a natural balance then there is a *natural imbalance*—men naturally have power, women are powerless; men are by nature sexually violent, women are destined to be victims—or that there is an *unnatural imbalance*—power relations are socially constructed and can be socially transformed.

Either way, the campaigns against rape raised important questions about how woman is understood, how sexual difference is organised and maintained, and thus asked: what are the conditions for rape, how is the climate created for sexual violence against women? Both assumptions remove rape from the area of criminal aberration and locate it within a much broader framework—a framework which examines the workings of ideology and locates rape as an instance (though not necessarily the exemplary instance) of sexist ideology. The difference between the two is not clear cut, not grounded in the absolute incompatibility of theoretical principles—and I stress this because it is the only way of understanding an historical shift in feminist focus (rather than an immutable opposition), a shifting alignment between theory and practice.

### **Balancing Acts**

The proposal of an unnatural imbalance focuses on the structuring of power and the work of ideology: how is rape as a practice maintained not only by individual men but by institutions—the law, medicine, education, the media? What became a problem was how to conceptualise the ideological politically. While an overall critique of patriarchal ideology was developed, this was manifested primarily through work on the media. Different campaigns attempted to expose the ideology which sustained rape, for instance, or the opposition to abortion, or discrimination against women in work. But these issues were not linked through an analysis of the material conditions which sustain ideology. So, for instance, agitation for changing laws relating to, and institutions surrounding, rape and abortion were pursued more or less independently. Although there are good reasons for this—these areas do have a specificity, do require particular tactics—there are also good reasons to link the campaigns strategically, to show how female sexualities are constructed, how sexual difference is inscribed across social institutions and legal practices. Thus each campaign, while retaining a certain autonomy,



would be located within a broader framework, providing a critique which situates sexism not just as an amorphous moving target, but in relation to the material.

The disparateness of the campaigns had a particularly adverse effect on organisation around rape. Two apparently contradictory developments occurred: firstly, an exclusive focus on rape, arising out of the isolation of the campaign, tended to foreground the notion of woman as victim; and secondly, rape became the obverse of specific, it became generalised so that its function as a metaphor (for the oppression of all women by all men) assumed more importance than the instance of rape itself. The development of rape as a generalised metaphor was partly the product of a failure to coordinate a programme (to politicise the ideological) but was markedly exacerbated as conservative governments in the US, Britain and Australia began to erode feminist gains and embark on an ideological program to get women back into the family and home. The Women's Movement began to lose power. Quite literally weakened in its effectivity, it also lacked the tools for analysing and responding to what was going on on a larger political scene (the backlash against feminism being part of a broader and systematic programme). With the loss of power came a misrecognition of the function of power. The erosion of feminist gains was seen as evidence of irredeemable sexism, rather than analysed in terms of a right wing political programme. The loose ends of feminism began to be pulled together on a new project, a project focusing on the ideological, but the ideological focused in a particular way.

Tendencies within the movement looked for something that would concretise this irredeemable sexism. What had now become established as a weighted metaphor – rape as the oppression of all women by all men – offered a key. But this metaphor proved to be somewhat empty in that it could not easily be concretised and therefore attacked. As a focus for organisation the power that it offered was that of negativity. It's hard to take up arms against a metaphor. You can use raped and battered women as evidence, but you can't make them the target of attack. A reframing took place: the earlier questions – what are the conditions for rape, how is the climate for sexual violence created – were inflected to investigate causation, and the logic of enquiry produced an answer. The media, in particular pornography, usurped rape as the prime metaphor.

As a focus for organisation pornography seemed to offer a positive power, for it could be concretised and attacked, precisely because it is representational. I stress this because many of the critiques of the feminist anti-pornography movement reiterate the importance of understanding porn as a mode of representation and not confusing this mode (a regime of significations) with reality. While I believe that there are crucial political issues at stake around representation, it is a mistake to accuse groups like Women Against Pornography of neglecting it, of confusing the real and the representational. What has happened is that ideology has been extrapolated from its material structures and reduced to the visible, the explicit, the explanatory. A precarious balancing act is being performed by trying to reconcile transformation (of relations

between men and women) with some notion of their natural imbalance. Transformation seems possible, the argument goes, because although you can't stop violence against women through band-aid measures (like rape crisis centres) you can stop it by going to the roots, eliminating the cause. If rape is the grand metaphor of oppression, then porn is the original sin. And the case for the prosecution rests in part on preserving the evidence of original sin.

### Dissent: Framing Pornography

In becoming a privileged feminist issue, pornography has also become a site for relating sex and violence. But it is difficult to discern the status of this relationship. In tracing the proliferation of writings and activities, what emerges with the greatest clarity is a confusion about the connections. Sometimes the issues are conflated, sometimes sharply separated, but invariably they turn upon a reduction of sexism to sex.

In the mid-seventies a spate of books, pamphlets and articles on rape appeared, most prominently Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*<sup>6</sup>, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*<sup>7</sup> and *Sexual Assault: Confronting Rape in America* by Nancy Gager and Cathleen Schurr<sup>8</sup>. In Australia a number of articles emerged out of anti-rape campaigns which used a psychoanalytic and marxist perspective<sup>9</sup>. Subsequently the British journal *m/f* has pursued work examining the strategies of anti-rape campaigns and the question of defining it as a crime of sex or violence<sup>10</sup>.

*Against Our Will* deals primarily with rape – pornography is not posed as its cause, but rather as a symptom of anti-woman sentiment and as evidence of the way in which male sexuality is exercised through violence against women. However, Brownmiller does define pornography as 'the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda' and equates its philosophy with rape, going so far as to call for government censor-

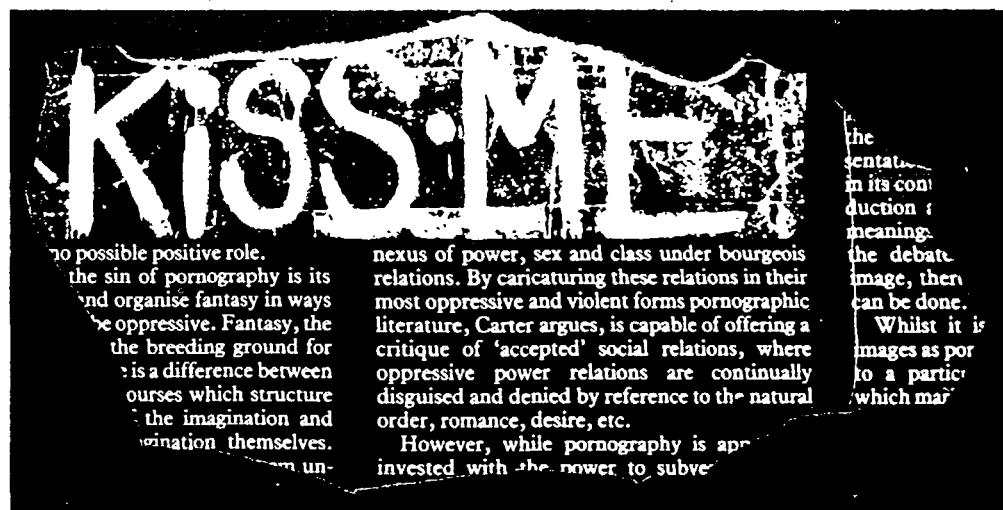
<sup>6</sup> New York, Bantam Books, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson (eds), New York, New American Library, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Ros Innes, "'What She Needs Is A Good Fuck' – Rape and Femininity", *Hecate*, July 1976, vol 2 no 2. Lesley Stern, 'The Language of Rape', *Intervention* 8, March 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Monique Plaza, 'Our Costs and Their Benefits', *m/f* 4, 1980, pp 28-40; Delia Dumaresq, 'Rape: Sexuality in the Law', *m/f* 5/6, 1981, pp 41-60.



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<sup>11</sup> New York, EP Dutton, 1974.

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<sup>12</sup> Boston, Beacon Press, 1978.

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<sup>13</sup> in Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: the Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*, New York, Vintage, 1978.

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<sup>14</sup> *MS* magazine, November 1978.

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

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<sup>16</sup> *MS* magazine, August 1977.

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<sup>17</sup> London, Virago, 1979.

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<sup>18</sup> see Longino *op cit.*

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ship of pornography. Andrea Dworkin's *Woman Hating*<sup>11</sup> focuses on misogyny, but gives particular attention to pornography. An influential later work focusing on misogyny and tracing a history of violence against women is Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*<sup>12</sup>.

Around 1977 or 1978, pornography campaigns emerged and issues of sex and violence were foregrounded in writings addressed to the pornography issue. Two articles by Robin Morgan indicate a general direction: 'Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape'<sup>13</sup> argues a causal relation between pornography and rape, and 'How to Run the Pornographers out of Town (And Preserve the First Amendment)'<sup>14</sup> urges feminists to actively protest against pornography by boycotting businesses, condemning the use of pornographic imagery in advertising, and pushing legislators to take action. Two articles by Gloria Steinem, in their very titles, indicate the way in which sex and violence are being construed: 'Erotica and Pornography: a Clear and Present Difference'<sup>15</sup> and 'Pornography: Not Sex but the Obscene Use of Power'<sup>16</sup> in which it is argued that 'erotica is about sexuality, but pornography is about power and sex-as-weapon – in the same way that we have come to understand that rape is about violence, and not really about sexuality at all'. Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*<sup>17</sup> extends her discussion of pornography to popular culture. In 1978 the San Francisco based group Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM) organised a large Take Back the Night March, and produced a literature packet. In 1979 Women Against Pornography (WAP) a New York Group which grew out of WAVPM, sponsored a conference to 'claim pornography as a feminist issue of national proportions'. There have since been many well attended conferences and marches on the issue throughout America, Britain and Australia.

In 1980 *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*<sup>18</sup> was published in the United States. A number of campaign groups were also formed, most prolifically in America – Woman Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), originally from Los Angeles, but now a national group (there is an active group of the same name in Britain), Women for the Abolition of Pornography, Men Against Sexist Violence. The US National Organisation for Women (NOW), not specifically concerned with pornography, took up the issue and in 1980 passed a resolution which reaffirms support for lesbian rights, but specifically declares public sex, pederasty, sado-masochism and pornography to be issues of violence, not sexual preference. Political tactics range from picketing, boycotting, vandalism against porn shops to lobbying for censorship, and WAP organises feminist tours of 42nd Street and Times Square as well as conducting extensive slide lecture tours using visual material to expose/shock as a form of feminist education.

Last year saw the publication of two feminist books on pornography – Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* and Susan Griffin's *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*. In Britain both were published by The Women's Press, indicating the

priority given to the porn issue. Both are concerned with pornography and sado-masochism as the linchpin of a misogynist culture, although Griffin's is more mystical – resting on the notion of a natural culture pertaining to women which has been systematically abused by men – and Dworkin's more polemical – insisting on the antagonism between a class of men and a class of woman and stressing heterosexuality, symbolised as penetration, as intrinsically violence against women. Shortly before these publications *Women, Sex and Pornography: A Controversial and Unique Study*<sup>19</sup> emerged from Australia. Although strongly criticised by feminists of various persuasions for its failure to politicise pornography and for relying on biological categories to explain why men and women react differently to porn, it was promoted as a feminist work and became a best seller.

The anti-porn movement has grown in momentum and impact. However, after the initial euphoria of massed demonstrations, the reaffirmation of solidarity reminiscent of earlier days, voices began to be raised against the swelling tide. Discussion began tentatively about tactics as well as modes of framing pornography through a feminist lens. In 'Pornography and Pleasure', Paula Webster prefaces her argument thus:

*A vast sea of feminist solidarity swelled around the issue of pornography. To move against the wave felt truly threatening. Although a few voices addressed contradictions in the anti-porn analysis, no dissenting movement developed. Criticism was kept to a minimum.*<sup>20</sup>

By now there is considerable dissension within feminism; but it is dissension framed by porn. And thus pornography acquires a certain power, so that confusions over sex and violence are written into the various discourses which insist on the insistence of porn. The dissenting voices follow various lines which inevitably intersect, but there seem to me five trajectories which can be distinguished. Firstly, there is a criticism of the anti-porn movement for its moralism. This line argues that defining pornography as a matter of violence rather than of sex comes dangerously close to assuming that sex, especially impersonal sex, is by nature violent, an assumption that leads to an over-idealisation of romance, love and committed relationships. Secondly, the call for censorship has been criticised on the grounds both that it involves an alignment with the Right and can thus only rebound on feminist and gay interests, and that it is based on a questionable cause-effect relationship between imagery and violence. Thirdly, there is a call for shift of focus from a patriarchal imaging of women to an examination of fantasy and a development of feminist erotica or pornography. Fourthly, monolithic conceptions of pornography have been challenged and attempts made to theorise it as a variety of practices operating across various institutions, subject to change in place and time, and therefore open to interventions other than wholesale opposition. Fifthly, beginnings have been made on the theorisation of the codes and conventions which characterise pornographic representations, which construct sexual difference and order ways of seeing.

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<sup>19</sup> New York, Macmillan, 1980.

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<sup>20</sup> Paula Webster, 'Pornography and Pleasure', *Heresies* 12 (Sex Issue), 1981, p 48. She is referring to Deidre English, 'The Politics of Porn', *Mother Jones*, April 1980, vol 5 no 3, p 20; and Ellen Willis, *Village Voice*, October 15, 1979.

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<sup>21</sup> Available from  
WAP, 579 9th  
Avenue, New  
York, NY 10036.

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*We are not carving out any new exceptions to the First Amendment. The Supreme Court has traditionally held that 'obscenity' is not protected speech... We want to change the definition of obscenity so that it focuses on violence, not on sex.*

This statement is from the Women Against Pornography Position Paper, 'Where We Stand on the First Amendment'<sup>21</sup>. A question presents itself: why choose pornography, an area specified by explicit sex, in order to make an argument about violence and in the name of violence deny the relevance of sex? Surely what is crucial to the argument is the connections between sex and violence in this area, connections which are not fixed and therefore require different levels of analysis. An initial step is to distinguish the kinds of connections between sex and violence that have been or might be established a) within the legal sphere; b) within pornographic representations; and c) between pornography and 'everyday life' (which intersects with the other two categories).

There has been feminist agitation for change in laws regarding both rape and pornography, but the slogan 'pornography is the theory, rape the practice' has informed the campaigns with a reductive perspective that has served to suppress the discontinuous way in which the ideological is mediated by the law. While this slogan might seem to offer an account of patriarchy, it certainly offers no theoretical perspective on the way in which different sexualities are constructed by the law, and provides no basis for a political practice that might intervene in the legal in a discontinuous manner to ensure *for feminism* different sexualities. Posing violence as the prime problem, as the expression of patriarchy, has led to certain feminist pressures for legal reclassification of rape – to remove the sexual element, and to situate it within the area of assault. In this case the separation of sex and violence has severe and debilitating repercussions for reform of rape legislation, for it completely diffuses the specificity of rape and undercuts the particularity of the feminist approach.

To insist, on the other hand, that the relation between sex and violence be maintained in the instance of rape, inscribed in legislation, is also an acknowledgement that sexualities are actively constructed through the law rather than simply rewarded or punished by it. And to insist on a connection on the legal level, to maintain the specificity of rape here, is not to generalise out to an all-embracing equation between sex and violence. It is still possible to ask what are the conditions for rape, how is the climate for rape created, to examine sexist ideology in various manifestations without conflating connection and causality. Once generalisations are instituted as prescriptive metaphors, when a picture of a woman being raped becomes more important than the rape of an actual woman, then feminist political practice suffers on several levels – not just because the concrete as some measure of the real is being usurped by the

unreality of the image or the imaginary, but because the ideological is being reduced to a very literal level, to the level of the explicit, of evidence.

The call for legal intervention in pornography via censorship has the same origin as the call for reclassification of rape as assault. The commonality lies in designating violence (male violence) not sex (female sexuality) as the problem. However, where it is imperative to inscribe the relation between sex and violence in legislation on rape, the problem posed by pornography is quite different. Any resort to censorship in the area of sexuality is informed by an assumption of an autonomous legal system operating upon already existing and complete sexualities. The Women Against Pornography position assumes that in the current state of affairs male sexuality is rewarded and female sexuality is punished, and suggests that legislation would redress this imbalance. What is more likely is that different kinds of sexualities would be constructed, not necessarily to the benefit of women.

The feminist lobby is not the only group fighting pornography. Other groups, such as Moral Majority and Festival of Light, are opposed to feminism as well as to pornography; and they have a far less confused position of sex and violence and the law, as well as a more coherent programme, of which pornography is only one part. That feminism is likely to lose out by censorship 'gains' has been pointed out<sup>22</sup> and most succinctly expressed in parallels drawn between the treatment of abortion on the Right and pornography among feminists:

*A fascinating workshop or audio-visual event: simultaneous showing of WAP and Right-to-Life slide shows. Actually, the ultimate meeting of these two groups is in the recently heard analysis that 'abortion is violence against women'.<sup>23</sup>*

The dangers, in legal terms, of conflating sex and violence, can be seen here. But the flip side of the feminist coin is an attempt to legislate against any connection and this also, in the long term, is likely to be detrimental to the movement, although for different reasons to those encountered in the rape issue:

*The new feminist definition of true or healthy sexuality now receives its clearest and most explicit articulation in discussions of the issue feminist theory perceives to be deeply related to rape: the production, consumption, and underlying assumptions of pornography. It has been another short but significant step from divorcing rape and sex to divorcing pornography and sex... Feminists should increase the pressure toward changing rape legislation; but changing law and changing love are not the same thing. In the wish to 'untangle' sex and violence, we have entangled ourselves in a new myth, one that considers it both possible and desirable to clean up love to correspond to an ideal that utterly dualizes tenderness and aggression... Getting porn off 42nd Street will do nearly nothing about getting 'this stuff' out of the bedroom, because it does nothing about acknowledging the connections between sexuality and aggression in the human psyche, connections exploited rather than created by the pornographers.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> see Jeanne Cordova and Kerry Lobel, 'Feminists and the Right - Merging over Porn?', *Lesbian Tide*, May/June 1980, and Mandy Merck, 'Pornography', *City Limits*, November 13-19, 1981, p 49.

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<sup>23</sup> 'Diary of a Conference' documentation of the planning of Towards a Politics of Sexuality, held at Barnard College, April 1982, p 19.

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<sup>24</sup> Diana Hume George, 'The Myth of Mythlessness and the New Mythology of Love: Feminist Theory on Rape and Pornography', *Enclitic* Fall 1980, vol 4 no 2, p 31.

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The relation between sex and violence within pornographic representations has been construed in a variety of ways. Where pornography is posed as an issue of violence, not sex, it is claimed that the representations are in themselves violent and assaulting and thus oppressive to women. There are connections here with the argument that rape is a question of assault, not sex. However, the separation of sex and violence, though common to arguments on both rape and pornography, has different implications for each. In the case of pornography the separation rests on casuistry—explicit sex is what informs the ‘power’ of the image, a power measured as violence. Like the law, pornography constructs sexed subjects, but viewing or reading, rather than legal ones. The casuistry involved in posing pornography as violent in itself denies the activity of reading and renders women totally powerless, oppressed by the representational in an identical way to the oppression experienced in rape.

The alternative is not to inscribe a connection between violence and sex in legislation on pornography. But since pornography, like any mode of representation, produces meanings, promotes certain kinds of readings, it is strategically necessary to examine the ways it articulates the connections between violence and sexuality (rather than to repress sex in the name of violence). Many feminist positions adopt this perspective, but the stress should be on articulation, i.e. on the work of representation, not on explicit content (be it sex or violence). The emphasis thus shifts from using pornography as evidence of explicit sexism to an examination of *how* sexism operates within the regime of pornographic representations. Any examination of this nature is likely to show that pornography produces a range of meanings about female sexuality, not all of them to do with violence. The axiomatic conjunction of sex and violence reduces our readings, and serves consequently to limit interventions within the representational arena itself—interventions which might elaborate diverse sexualities *for* feminism.

In relation between the pornographic and everyday life the connection between sex and violence is frequently posed as causal. One line of reasoning says that pornography directly affects everyday life: the ‘intention to arouse’ which characterises porn is interpreted as sexual arousal which is then translated into acts of violence in the bedroom, in the streets. Here the claim that pornography is an issue of violence and not sex is spurious, because the argument for provocation rests on a content which is explicitly sexual. In this case there are layerings of conflation, but it is important tactically to disentangle the sex/violence connection. To say that there are connections between porn and everyday life (and few feminists would deny this) is not the same as saying that pornography causes violence in everyday life. The problem lies with the conflating of two positions: one, the posing of violence as an effect of pornography; and two, the posing of pornography as in itself violent, an embodiment of sexism. Violence is both cause and effect. Certainly pornography constructs meanings, works on an ideological level, but where the effect argument becomes circular, where it turns upon violence, it leads in on itself to political impasse. It converges with the

position of the Right, in that violence and sex are apparently bad *per se*.

Another line of reasoning says that much of everyday life is pornographic. Here 'everyday life' can mean either all relations between men and women, but particularly those expressed in a certain kind of behaviour—heterosexuality; or modes of representation which are not 'illicit' in the way that porn is, such as advertising, movies, television. Within the framework of the Dworkin argument these are all manifestations of misogyny, of woman-hatred, and a continuum is posited with porn as simply one extreme of a much broader tendency. For many feminists, it is these everyday manifestations which more crucially deserve attention. But to collapse everything under the metaphor of pornography is to weaken seriously feminist interventions across the whole range of representations, precisely because of the reduction of sexism to sex (and violence).

In both lines of reasoning on the relation between porn and everyday life, on the intersection of sex and violence, what is remarkable is that violence is not theorised in any way—it is either demonstrated (as in slides of bondage) or used as a metaphor for misogyny or male power. What we have here is a serious conflation of power and violence, and it seems to me that it is this, along with the reduction of sexism to sex, that really positions the anti-porn movement as reactionary. The Right similarly appears to lack a theorisation of sex and violence, seems to pose both as bad *per se*, but in fact there is a logic to what the Right deems good and bad. There is good sex, which unites and reproduces the

...sting  
...occurs when  
you attempt a transition within a  
passage which itself constitutes a  
transition (a double *mise en cadre*?). It  
signals the shift from an account of  
Laura Mulvey's discussion of visual  
pleasure to the proposition that female  
pleasure has become a fetish. This  
passage itself marks the shift from a  
partial but pertinent consideration of  
the institution of porn on the basis of  
the Williams Report to an attempt 'to  
find a way of characterising the  
representations designated as porn so  
that they can be seen as contradictory  
and open to change'. This is perhaps  
not the place to argue that  
representations do not have to be  
contradictory for them to be involved in  
a process of change. They must be and  
ways are caught up in contradictions.  
...the same thing as  
...and

...mode of address of por...  
(which is the terrain you chose  
to discuss) is characterised by a pr  
anonymity. Most porn films and  
photographs are either unsigned or  
appear under pseudonyms. This is  
to avoid prosecution, because publi  
and retailers tend to carry the financ  
and legal risks anyway. At the same  
time, when compared to the smooth  
flowing regime of mainstream cine  
porn is heavily marked by the pr  
of the enunciation. But there is  
author to whom these marks  
subjectivity could be credited a  
would assume responsibility for  
fantasy articulated by and in th  
discourse. Moreover, the tradition  
strategies deployed by mainstream  
cinema to achieve an impersonal m  
of narration which nevertheless bin  
the viewer into the diegesis, are  
open to the porn film. The specif  
...a maximum



family, and there is also legitimate violence, as exercised by the state through the military and the police forces, which unites the nation.

Yet much of the coercion exercised by the Right is not manifested in acts of violence, but through resort to legislation which ensures, among other things, the construction of sexualities (acts around homosexuality, age of consent, parental rights, access to birth control and abortion, adultery, marriage and divorce, child custody), and the construction of 'peace' through, for instance, industrial legislation limiting trade union activism and delimiting what may be interpreted as subversive activities. The feminist campaign against pornography is very useful to the Right, not just because it chooses to misinterpret the feminist position, but because that position is confused. Both power and violence are neutralised in the campaign because the two terms are abstracted from the political sphere and used to mirror each other in a metaphoric way. Instead of scrutinising pornography for a revelation of male power, feminism would do well to scrutinise the Right, to see how power is being articulated not just as a backlash but in order actively to structure positions for feminism.

It is necessary for feminism to see the way in which the Right's opposition to working mothers and wives, abortion and pornography, to take three obvious issues, are not unrelated to each other or to an overall political strategy. In the United States the Family Protection Act offers a good example of the formulation of a coherent programme. It was first proposed in 1979 by Senator Laxalt, who significantly plays a double role as Reagan's campaign manager and Moral Majority spokesman in Congress. The bill was rejected as a package deal but is being systematically introduced and passed piecemeal. Those of its provisions so far enacted include stipulations that textbooks belittling the traditional role of women in society not be purchased with federal money, that federally funded legal services be denied for abortions, school desegregation, divorce, or homosexual rights litigation, and that parents of people under eighteen seeking birth control devices and drugs from government-funded clinics must be informed.<sup>25</sup>

### Taking Offense/Taking the Offensive

*WARNING: If you are offended by graphic subject matter, We urge you not to see this film.*

This warning, in large type, accompanied a half-page advertisement for *Not A Love Story* in New York. The text describes the film as 'a motion picture about Pornography'. The word 'Pornography', in heavy type, is arranged to balance symmetrically with 'Not a Love Story'. The advertisement also carries three review quotations which situate the film as a feminist 'look' at porn. But the hook which catches the reader is the 'warning' – at once a repellant and an enticement. The selling technique is

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<sup>25</sup> see Zillah R Eisenstein, 'The Sexual Politics of the New Right: Understanding the Crisis of Liberalism for the 1980s', *Signs* Spring 1982, vol 7 no 3, pp 567-588; June Kress, 'Austerity and the Right Wing Attack on Women', *Contemporary Marxism* 4, Winter 1981-82; and Judith R Walkowitz, 'Male Vice and Feminist Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Britain', *History Workshop* 13, Spring 1982, pp 77-94.

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familiar, but its familiarity relates less to the promotion of porn than to horror films. The warning about 'graphic subject matter' refers, of course, to explicit sex. The film is being sold on its pornographic content. It could be argued that this is a skilful expedient for luring an audience which, once captive, can be converted. I am sceptical about this – not because of some notion of dishonesty in advertising, nor because of some belief in the overriding power of pornographic imagery, but because of the resort to the graphic, to the explicit. The problem is not that the feminist critique uses porn images but that it 'shows' pornography in order to show how pornography illustrates sexism.

I have argued that the appeal of pornography as a target lies in its visibility, and that this involves a misrecognition – both of the problems facing feminism, and of the status of the visible. The appeal of the cinema also lies in its visibility, its being-there-to-be-looked-at quality. The pleasure of looking has been much discussed in film theory, and in the process the 'innocence' of pleasure has been put under scrutiny. Attention has been focused not on what we see (content) but on how we see, how pleasure is structured by the filmic text. From a feminist perspective this has involved an exploration of the way in which sexual difference is constructed in the cinema, of the way in which the gaze is split between active/male and passive/female, and the representation of female pleasure. Representation here extends beyond depiction to questions of viewing; how can feminine desire be inscribed within viewing practices? These developments have turned upon the axis of recognition/misrecognition. The status of the visible has been interrogated with ruthless persistence.

Feminist film theory and the feminist interest in pornography could well be travelling towards a convergence or a collision. If the dominant anti-pornography tendency misrecognises the status of the visible, feminist film theory is well equipped to 'correct' this vision by problematising the visible, by posing representation as a mediation rather than as transparent illustration. The question of effects is thus disengaged from causality and reformulated in terms of effectivity. Here it is not a question of what kind of behaviour is caused by pornographic representations, but rather how are meanings effected through the work of the text? Another potential mode of 'correction' is to refuse complicity with the victim syndrome which reduces pleasure to male pleasure and equates this with male power (so that pleasure is not simply not innocent, but positively guilty) – to focus instead on female pleasure, either 'uncovering' this in what is established as pornography, or generating its presence in a feminist visual erotica.

A further possibility is a refined attention to the relation between desire and representation. Pornography becomes a site of exploration, a sighting, where explicitness is posed not as an embodiment of sexism, but as an embodiment of desire. Or rather, as an *attempt* to embody desire. If desire is somewhat literally put in the picture, what of desire that is left out of the picture? What is the status of the Imaginary and the Real in this cinema? One of the paradoxes of pornography lies in a simul-

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<sup>26</sup> 'Towards a Feminist Erotica', *Camera*work, March 1982, pp 14-19.

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<sup>27</sup> see Coward, op cit; Beverly Brown, 'A Feminist Interest in Pornography: Some Modest Proposals', *m/f* 5/6, 1981, pp 5-18; John Ellis, 'On Pornography', *Screen* Spring 1980, vol 21 no 1, pp 81-108; Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, pp 109-128.

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<sup>28</sup> Deidre English, Amber Hollibaugh, Gayle Rubin, 'Talking Sex: A Conversation on Sexuality and Feminism', *Feminist Review* 11, Summer 1982, p 44.

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taneous compulsion to fetishise (to fragment the body) and a compulsion to 'reveal all'. It's possible to envisage this paradox providing a new entrée to the essence of the cinema. Here the marginal illuminates the mainstream, the body of the text (classical cinema) is re-animated as a textualised body feeding the vampirish appetites of that endlessly desiring machine – film theory.

I am not at all sure that any of these developments would be of benefit to feminism at the present time. A feminist 'correction' to the WAP or WAVAW position is not likely to lead very far if it is based upon arguments about representation (such as 'no image is intrinsically pornographic') because its questions are still addressed to the 'body of evidence' presented by the agenda-setters. This is not to say that we should disregard pornography as a feminist issue or close our eyes and hope it will go away. Although it seems crucial to challenge the explanation of pornography that rests on explicitness (of sex, and of sexism) it also seems important to acknowledge that pornography is an industry – one that organises not just images, but ways of selling its product for primarily male consumption. Thus, the pornographic maintains some specificity, is not simply collapsed into everyday sexism, nor is its power measured purely in terms of visual impact. This project of specification is a difficult one, as demonstrated by Kathy Myers who argues that we should 'shift the debate on representation away from the image' and pay more attention to 'the conditions of its production and consumption', and yet still concentrates on 'reading' images.<sup>26</sup> I shall avoid the difficulties here, but there are a number of attempts to specify the 'conditions of its production and consumption', to outline the parameters of the 'institution' or 'regime' or 'apparatus' of pornography.<sup>27</sup>

### Eden and After

To return to an earlier question – what are the possibilities for a feminist oppositional practice? Developing an alternative look either through a critique as in *Not A Love Story*, or through an oppositional female erotica, will not dislodge the pornography industry; but it is surely desirable to shift the grounds of attack from a logic which begins by taking offence and proceeds to taking the offensive, to shift the critique from a power nurtured by negativity to a critique which incorporates a politics of pleasure. Important work done in feminist film theory and practice, informed by broader feminist developments, can provide the basis for new directions.

One of the more positive by-products of the pornography controversy has been a recent opening up, within the Women's Movement, of discussions about sexuality, an emerging critique of the way in which the movement itself has constructed (through prohibition and advocacy) certain sexualities and repressed others, a process which has been referred to as 'the missionary position of the women's movement'.<sup>28</sup> The

critique of this process has involved some spectacularly staged entrances from a variety of concealed closets, as well as testimonials about 'secret gardens' of sexual phantasies that do not always show up as a bed of roses<sup>29</sup>. This kind of coming out (which dislocates the lesbian/heterosexual opposition) could lead either to a war of contesting identities or to a liberal pluralism which tolerates all differences. However, the insertion of phantasy as a question provides a challenge to the notion of sexuality as fixed by identity. In fact it is precisely the gap between phantasy and identity that provides a space for exploring a number of issues which surface at the intersection of feminism and film.

By way of conclusion, I shall suggest what some of these issues might be. The suggestions do not even approximate a theorisation of pornography – feminist or otherwise; they are more in the nature of spin-offs from thinking about porn, and they spin into questions about a cinematic politics of pleasure. The questions revolve around phantasy. How does phantasy articulate with fiction? What is the relation between sexual identity and identification in the viewing process? Is there a feminine desire commensurate with feminism that can be satisfied by a pleasure articulated through textual strategy? If the question of pleasure arises, how is a cinema of arousal conceived?

Much psychoanalytically-oriented work on the cinema has dealt with phantasy, with the way in which the cinema harnesses unconscious drives and desires. Where the cinema is seen to be structured by the Unconscious, in a simultaneous movement the viewer's Unconscious is seen to be structured by the filmic work. The understanding of 'phantasy' used in this theoretical work is fairly broad, and indeed capitalises on a lack of clarity in Freud's own work. Freud uses the term in three ways: firstly, to denote conscious imaginings or day dreams (in less specialised writings this is often spelt 'fantasy'); secondly, to denote unconscious phantasies which have a similar structure to dreams in that their origin lies in repressed material – analysis of the manifest content should reveal the way in which the prohibition is present in the actual formation of the wish that motivates the dream or the phantasy; and thirdly, to denote primal phantasies, fundamental unconscious structures which transcend individual experience. Freud draws an analogy between day dreams and nocturnal dreams; in both cases the primary material lends itself to 'scripting', to organised scenes and dramatisation. Day dreams differ from nocturnal dreams in that a greater degree of secondary revision is brought to bear so that the scenarios have more consistency, but both are subject to the same psychological mechanisms which organise wish fulfilment and concomitant defensive strategies. The relation between desire and phantasy is much harder to work out in Freud; sometimes the terms seem to conflate, at others desire is seen as a way of articulating phantasy, or vice versa.

Within film theory, phantasy seems most often to be used as an approximation of desire, so that the film text is either seen as working upon the unconscious desires/phantasies (usually primal) of the viewer or the text is given the same status as dreams/day dreams/phantasies, and

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<sup>29</sup> see *Heresies* 12 (Sex Issue), 1981 and 'Diary of a Conference', op cit.

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analysed according to a symptomatic reading which charts the return of the repressed through defensive operations and wish-fulfilment strategies. The generalised way in which phantasy is employed in cinematic theory gives rise to some problems which become particularly pronounced when trying to deal with a cinema which more specifically registers the phantastic. Most theory has concentrated on narrative, posing the narrative text as akin to the dream in 'working' towards wish fulfilment by providing satisfaction, a happy ending; but also, as representation, akin to ideological processes, working towards unification, securing identity and resolution, both of the film and the viewing subject. Realism and narrative have been privileged sites for the return of the repressed, and breaks with them have been advocated as ways of fracturing the false unity of the viewing subject, provoking a more self-conscious and active subject. What has been glaringly absent from much of this discourse is a conceptualisation of fiction. Fiction is most often collapsed into narrative or seen as shaped by and subordinate to realism: even where we know that we are watching something unreal we are structured into 'belief' through the strategies of realism. But it might be important to explore the way in which *disbelief* operates in film viewing and to ask how this relates to pleasure. A partial explanation for the lack of specification given to fiction seems to me to lie with the very generalised and often confused way that phantasy has been used, along with the rationale for its utilisation – to explain narrative.

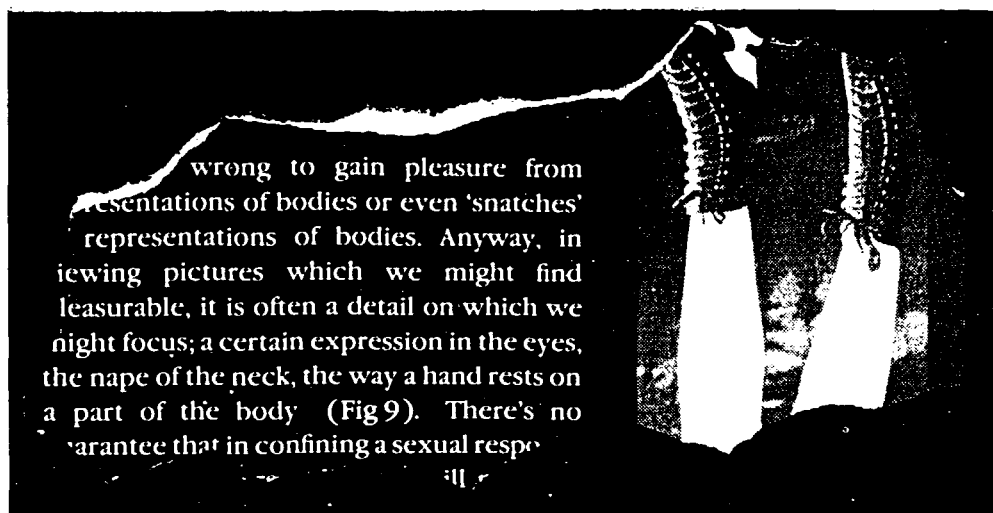
At a certain level it seems useful to make a distinction between, on the one hand *fantasy* as conscious imaginings, day-dreams, inventions, make-believe, reverie; and on the other hand, the various other senses in which *phantasy* is used. This is not to make a strict demarcation between the Conscious on one hand and the Unconscious on the other, for clearly day-dreams can tell us about the unconscious and are indeed structured by psychic mechanisms. However, the functioning of different kinds of phantasy needs to be distinguished.

Fantasy performs a particular function in waking life, in that the fantastic scenario can be evoked voluntarily, affords a certain pleasure, though not necessarily satisfaction, since fantasies tend to recur and be repetitious. They are also frequently characterised by a delimitation of defensive operations, so that the fantasiser can clearly recognise that, although located in the daytime, the fantasies are removed from everyday life. They might express wishes, but in a mediated way: gratification is to be achieved not through acting out the fantasies, but through the activity of fantasising itself. However, if there is a delimitation of defensive operations within fantasy it is likely that the defence mechanism is transferred – there exists paradoxically a compulsion to repeat fantasies and a prohibition on repeating, a defensiveness about 'telling'. Fantasies are illicit in a way that dreams are not – they span a space between self-indulgence and public restraint.

Fiction *differs* from fantasy in that it is constituted by a process of telling, and in the process elicits a response, asks to be read, looked at, listened to, but not necessarily believed. It is also *related* to fantasy – not because it is a direct representation or manifestation, but in terms of function. Fiction also relates to phantasy in the other senses that have been noted, but for the moment I shall hold these relations in abeyance. It is perhaps more important to start thinking about how to distinguish fiction from narrative and realism. A commonsense understanding of fiction is that which is imaginary, feigned, invented. It is the antithesis of fact, truth, reality. Fiction involves a shaping, a moulding, indeed a structuring. The raw material which fiction shapes, structures into a discourse, is something like fantasy. Where fantasy lends itself to scripting, to organised scenes and dramatisation, it does not necessarily involve a logical sequencing, nor a logical relation to the real world, to everyday life. The work fiction performs upon this raw material is not necessarily a correction of these ‘mismatches’, it is more in the nature of a realisation – in words or pictures. This process of realisation poses problems for the reading of fiction, since realisation tends towards an anchorage in realism, representation towards an anchorage in meaning. However, it strikes me that the reading of fiction in film has been largely determined by the theoretical preoccupation with realism which has nurtured a realist mode of reading. The delimitation of defensive operations in fiction has been compensated for by highly defensive reading practices which in effect work to censor the fictionality of filmic texts. A will to knowledge has erected barricades against the pleasures of disbelief.

Part of the problem of dealing with fiction in film has no doubt to do with the status of the moving image, its referentiality, its visibility, its explicitness. The image can be identified, and this has led to elaborate arguments about identification, the tyranny of the cinematic apparatus in constructing an identity for the viewer through mechanisms of identification. Curiously, much film theory of this nature coincides with the ‘body of evidence’ used by the prosecution in anti-porn campaigns. If all movies construct meanings, promote certain readings, what is interesting about fiction is the kind of reading that it elicits (and which is often refused). There is a difference between fantasising and reading or watching fiction. Where the fantastic scenario can be voluntarily evoked in the activity of fantasising, the reader-spectator does not have the same freedom, is denied originality, refused as origin of the scenario. However, if there is a delimitation of defensive operations in the activity of fantasising, there is also a prohibition, a defensiveness about ‘telling’, about revealing.

For the spectator of fiction this prohibition is in a sense lifted, since the telling can be identified as originating elsewhere. This identification of the ‘elsewhere’ is important for it allows an identification of the seen as other, and so foregrounds the gap between fiction and reality. Fiction does not ask to be believed, does not seek to establish a relation of



wrong to gain pleasure from representations of bodies or even 'snatches' representations of bodies. Anyway, in viewing pictures which we might find pleasurable, it is often a detail on which we might focus; a certain expression in the eyes, the nape of the neck, the way a hand rests on a part of the body (Fig 9). There's no guarantee that in confining a sexual response

identity between the real and the image, or the viewer and the narrative voice. Rather than suturing the viewer into the text, it proffers a possibility of pleasure by stimulating the imaginative capacity. This projection of an other scene does not involve a looking ahead, a desire to fulfil a lack by jumping the metonymic gun. It is not motivated by the incompleteness of the image (which implies that completion may be achieved in the next image). Rather, the fiction declares the limits of its imagery in relation to the real. Fiction is posited on pretense, but not a pretense of plenitude: instead of the image asserting its presence as the only possibility (or obversely signalling absence) it provokes other possibilities, substitutions. The projection of images onto the screen elicits the viewer's projection or super-imposition of images, of the Imaginary, of fantasy.

Fiction does not constitute a category exclusive of narrative, independent of realism. I am not even sure that it is possible to speak of a structure of fiction. Most films contain fictional elements, and I have simply attempted a tentative sketch of some relation between fiction and fantasy. Once a move is made from 'most films' to those which extend beyond the incorporation of fictional elements, which more specifically register the fantastic, it seems important to understand how those films function as fiction—not just as animated phantasies. For feminists it might be more productive to explore both the kinds of readings elicited by fiction and the possibilities for using fiction to exploit pleasure. The 'intention to arouse' which seems to characterise porn films has proved problematic for feminism, since in the porn industry this means a promotion of the male consumer's erection and masturbation. Analysis has usually pointed to the way that this is dependent on an objectification (if not assault upon) the female body. So, much exploration of feminine pleasure in feminist cinema has been premised on an elimination from the image of the naked or sexualised female body. In a curious way this has also frequently involved a desexualisation of pleasure, a

suspicion of all pleasure promoted by cinema. But questions beginning to surface within the movement, questions about what women find a turn-on, what kind of fantasies are mobilised, could productively be explored in cinema, by looking at pornography and its relation to fiction. In other words it is possible to explore questions of stimulation and arousal without submitting to a Pavlovian notion of the cinema, to look at *processes* which might potentially involve a structuring of diverse sexualities for feminism.

### The Body in Evidence

I began this paper by contesting the way in which anti-porn movements have focused the visibility of pornography as a target, have taken the explicit sex of pornography to demonstrate that it constitutes evidence of explicit sexism. I am convinced that such an approach is strategically inappropriate. However, although pornography is neither explained nor accounted for by its explicitness (as has often enough been pointed out, porn titillates by leaving out elements, by heightening expectations), for the development of a feminist politics of pleasure it might be necessary to reverse the process and account for how the explicitness does operate. One explanation revolves around substitution:

*The substitution of the look for physical contact is precisely the essential precondition for porn and the specific difference which distinguishes it from other scopophilic regimes such as looking at family snap shots or Hollywood movies.*<sup>30</sup>

Willemsen goes on to argue that it is 'the loss generated by the friction between the phantasy looked for and the phantasy offered' that provokes the 'compensatory activity associated with porn, ie masturbation'.<sup>31</sup> Fiction, I have argued, evokes a response of superimposition, the projection of fantasy involves a process of substitution, an imaginary image for the present image. Pornography is a particularly condensed version of fiction and is also overdetermined by sexual fantasy, by the figuring out of body space, the spacing out of bodies. But the substitution is not necessarily that of the look for physical contact. A desire to appropriate both the body and the image can only be frustrated since the phantasy can only embody desire, it cannot satisfy desire by offering the body. And if fiction declares the limits of its imagery in relation to the real, porn does so to an even greater extent – gratification is not achieved through acting out the fantasies or through the enactment on the screen of fantasies but through the activity of fantasising itself. This obviously involves the activity of looking, but not the look itself as substitution. The viewer does not necessarily work to confirm sexual identity but to disperse it. The body is very much in evidence in porn but its fictionality, its distance from the real, is potentially heightened.

To reinstate the body in a feminist cinema of fictionality, then, is not

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Willemsen, 'Letter to John', *Screen Summer* 1980, vol 21 no 2, p 59.

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, p 61.

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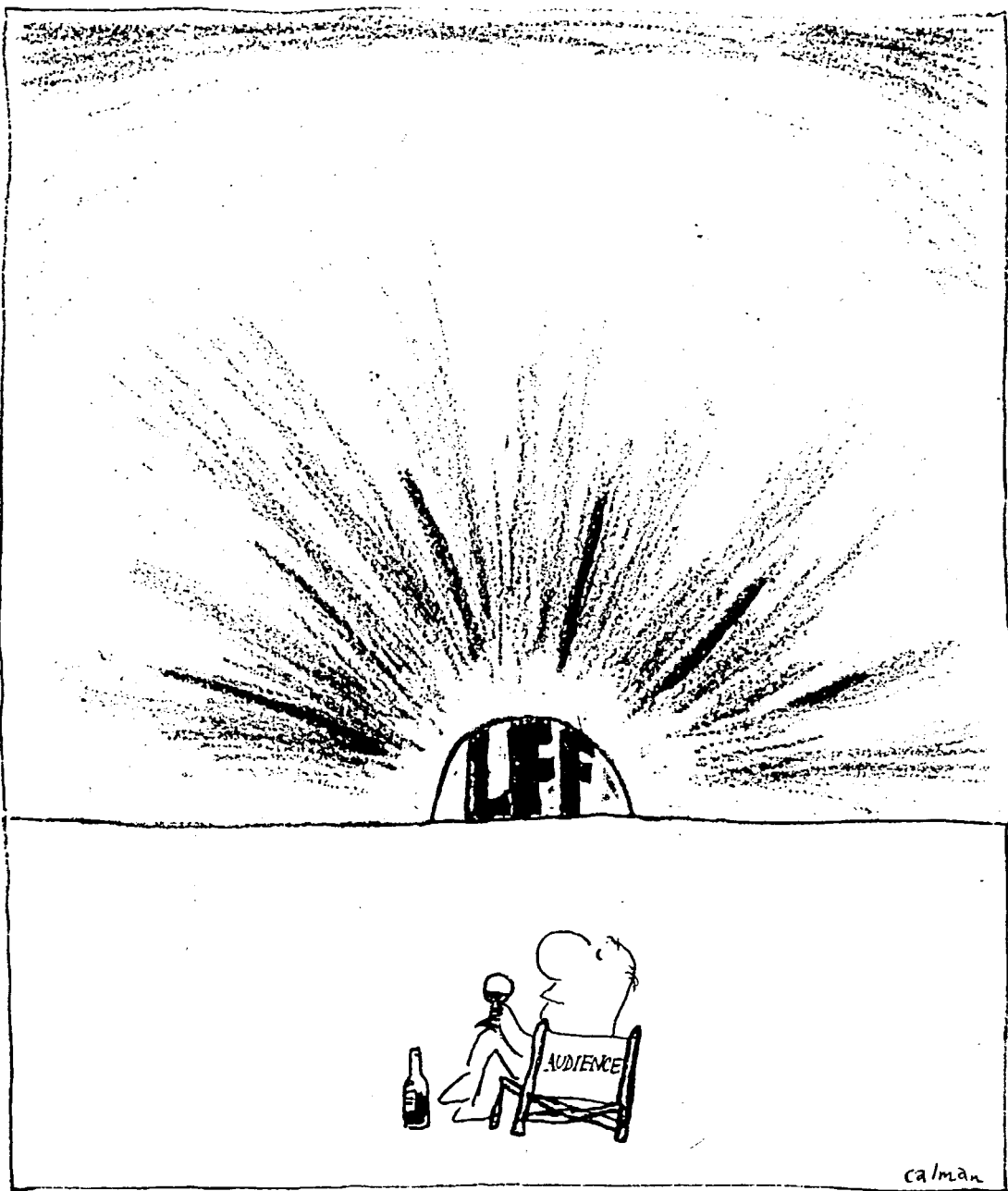
necessarily to reduce woman to body, to use the image as evidence of woman *as* body. Rather, viewing processes could be generated to disperse rather than confirm sexual identity, to explore sexuality by paradoxically refusing the sight of the body as a site of realism. Which is not to withhold from sight. The body in evidence is not the body as evidence.

### Coming to an Inconclusion

Many of the critiques of pornography argue that porn is a representation of male phantasy, of the collective male Unconscious, and as such reveals a conjunction of sex and death expressed in a desire to destroy the feminine principle. When women admit to being turned on by porn images, or having fantasies which may involve violence or submission, the confession is often qualified by an acknowledgement of conditioning – patriarchy writes the scripts and we are all assigned roles. The problem with this approach is that it rests on a notion of sexuality as given, as fixed, so that fantasy is seen as a confirmation of belief, or in the case of ‘incorrect’ female fantasies as a defence against disbelief. However, insofar as this approach removes fantasy from the realm of the purely personal and idiosyncratic it does indirectly raise questions about the way in which sexual difference is structured on an unconscious level. This is where various notions of phantasy, rather than fantasy, need to be employed.

I do not wish to locate porn films as pure fiction or innocent fantasy. Certainly the fantasies of porn are articulated together with a structuring of phantasies which privilege a male view of female sexuality. But if we are to challenge the notion of fixed sexual identities, if we are concerned with processes of construction in the cinema, then it is worth the risk of exploring female fantasy, of exploiting the possibilities of filmic fiction. For it may well turn out that female fantasy is not singular and certainly contradictory, that the intertwinings of sex and death and violence are not uniquely male properties. There is no formula for a feminist pornography, nor would it be desirable to pose the love story (as in ‘not a love story’) as a feminine opposition, or erotica as a feminine truth. Phantasy, on the level of the Unconscious, does not make neat distinctions between sex and love, between clean and dirty, between pacifism and aggression. On the more conscious level fantasies might well be mobilised to focus in particular ways, but this is not to say that fantasies about masochism or life-nurturing love have nothing to do with sadism or death.

A shift of attention from pornography to the possibilities of fiction might provide a way of constructing and exploring diverse sexualities *for* feminism. This is certainly not to suggest that a feminine desire commensurate with feminism will be found and returned to its proper place. Rather, the hope, and the risk, is that in the gap between sexual identity and fantasy opened up by fiction, improper places – spaces of impropriety – might be sighted.



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A dossier of original essays on aspects of sitcom.

*Costs and details in NFT December Programme Booklet.*

# MOVIES, MANIA AND MASCULINITY

63

## MICHAEL O'PRAY CONSIDERS A COUNTER-CINEMA OF SEXUALITY

*There is the phrase: 'Be a man' (never: 'Be a woman'), as if it were an exotic role, perhaps because the implicit concept of maleness is manic and overwrought.*

Adrian Stokes<sup>1</sup>

IN A RECENT article discussing the prohibition on American cinema of the 1940s to represent the sexual act, Frank Krutnik suggests that it meant in the *film noir*:

*a hyper-charging of its signifying operations: the sexuality which could not be explicitly shown was implied through looks, through the delirious visual style, through obtuse metaphorical dialogue, through perverse and contradictory characterisation, and through the cycle's characteristic mise-en-scène.*<sup>2</sup>

It could be argued, and has been implicitly at least in Lacanian film analyses, that all mainstream narrative film has, to some degree or other, been the site of sexual *displacement* into the formal and *mise-en-scène* elements, simply for the reason that sexuality understood in the psycho-analytical sense cannot be restricted to the narrative as such. Furthermore, if mainstream film is a powerful regime of 'maleness' then it is as both representation and *means* of representation. To take a notorious and obvious example, the violent murderous attack on Janet Leigh in *Psycho*'s shower scene is duplicated almost in the 'frenzied' editing of that scene. A less transparent example is the displaced sexuality of the Roger Moore/James Bond film series where foreplay, excitement and satiation is gained through stringing together highly orchestrated 'spectacles' of technological control, involving 'male' dexterity in deploying weapons, cars and machinery.

More interestingly, it is notable that sexual explicitness in mainstream films in recent years has not meant the absence of displacement. In fact, as Krutnik notes, in the *mise-en-scène* of a recent so-called *film noir* like *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 'grubbiness' has replaced the 1946 version's 'radiant cleanliness'. If explicit representation has drained the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, vol III, (ed) Lawrence Gowing, London, Thames and Hudson, 1978, p 282.

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Krutnik, 'Desire, Transgression and James M Cain', *Screen* May-June 1982, vol 23 no 1, p 43.

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<sup>3</sup> Kleinian concepts in relation to film are discussed in my article 'On Adrian Stokes and Film Aesthetics', *Screen*, vol 21 no 4, pp 91-97.

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<sup>4</sup> See 'A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic Depressive States' and 'Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States' in *Writings of Melanie Klein*, vol I, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1975; and Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, London, Heinemann, 1964, especially chapter eight.

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narrative of a certain sexual tension (denoting two levels of sexual movement in film narrative) in *film noir* remakes, it has meant an association of sexuality with feelings of disgust, degradation and anxiety – all affects vital in primitive phantasies of sexual couplings where identifications between sexual parts and excreta, the anus and the mouth, are rife. (Freud's case of the Wolf Man is an exploration of these kinds of phantasy.)

In connection with these brief remarks, it is worth considering Stoke's suggestion which prefaces this article. It seems reasonable to believe that the 'masculinisation' of film representation projects a 'male sexuality' that is fundamentally fraught, anxious, defensive – in Stoke's word, manic. For Melanie Klein, the manic was always a feature of early infantile defences typically constructed in the depressive position<sup>3</sup> against its attendant feelings of anxiety, guilt and loss. Structured in terms of an omnipotent denial of these unconscious feelings, manic defences involve phantasies of triumph, control and contempt.<sup>4</sup>

Unconsciously faced with knowledge of the separation from the mother and the breast, and therefore of the dependence on them, the infant experiences intense feelings of fear and loss, feelings which without the manic. For Melanie Klein, the manic is always a feature of early infantile control of internal objects identified with these objects of sustenance and dependence, the infant denies any dependence while at the same time by that very control accedes to the dependence denied. Triumph in phantasy equally achieves the same effect while also denying any feelings of value characteristically ascribed to the mother and breast. Phantasies involving contempt for the object denies the object's power to cause experiences of loss and guilt. At the core then of the manic defences is a massive ambivalence toward the objects concerned.

This triad of triumph, control and contempt also justifies attacks on the objects, ensuing in even severer feelings of loss and guilt, and so demanding more manic defence and so on. Only the reparative aspect of the depressive position rescues the infant from this vicious circle. There seems little doubt that the representation of women in our culture is very often determined by such phantasies. In advertising, for instance, woman is systematically identified with the commodity being sold, taking on its qualities: clean-cut and functional as the washing machine; exotic, mysterious and wild (but ultimately controllable by a real man) as the car; sumptuous, juicy and edible as the chocolate bar or whatever.

These representations imply a 'maleness' by which control of women in narrative and image is achieved. It would be false, however, to think that such psychical mechanisms are somehow necessarily connected with cultural representations of women, for if such representations did not exist or if they were successfully opposed, it would still be the case that manic defences would be an integral feature of an individual's psychical formation. For example, in mainstream cinema such mechanisms have been active in representations of Indians, workers, communists, blacks, outcasts, Nazis etc. In the recent spectaculars, 'maleness' and aggression have been displaced into the *mise-en-scène* of an elaborate

technology representing omnipotent phantasies of an ultimate control over the universe itself, where the manic has reached such frantic heights that the narrative is almost drained of movement and tension and the exhausted 'male' viciously turns on all objects – manipulating, tricking, destroying.

Implicit in these brief remarks is the idea that filmic 'maleness' is an intrinsic part of the phantasy of woman as object to be controlled, triumphed over and rendered contemptible, and as such supports the view that so-called male sexuality is as much an issue (theoretically at least) as female sexuality. In fact, what is at issue, in the final analysis, is *sexuality* itself and what is meant by that concept. One means of opposing the power of these 'male' phantasies has been to reject narrative as such, thus denying any diegetic means of aggression through representation of women as a narrative function. A logical step here, taken by Peter Gidal for instance, is not to represent women at all. Nevertheless the problem remains of how such a non-narrative without a female image persists in representing 'maleness'. The formal procedures of these films often betray a masculinity which functions generally, without the need of images of women (or men for that matter) or narrative. Gidal's review<sup>5</sup> of Malcolm Le Grice's *Finnegans Chin – temporal economy* is a good example of a critical reading of a film by way of a notion of phallogentrism that isolates the *mise-en-scène* of a film as the representation of an all-embracing 'maleness'. The problem in many ways is how to represent *at all*.

In an article on pornography and the Williams Report, Richard Wollheim makes some pertinent points which highlight this question. He suggests that the power of pornography lies less in its content than its power as an institution, practice and context for sexual fantasising:

*Pornography exerts a hold over us through its content and the way in which its content relates to our fantasies. But it also exerts a hold over us in its own right, or as a container which our fantasies then represent as relating us, or forcing us to relate, to its content. . . . pornography is capable, not just of raising or lowering the volume of our fantasies, but of moulding their character. The fundamental reason is that the work of pornography can engage with some of our more potent fantasies: those which are fantasies about our sexuality – instructing us whether it is dangerous, whether it is enjoyable, whether it is permitted, whether indeed it is ours, or ours only by proxy.*<sup>6</sup>

This kind of explanation seems to have some affinity with the feminist observation that 'it is perhaps one of the most extreme forms of alienation when not even one's sexuality is one's own'. Pornography, then, would extend beyond questions of female subordination in representations of sexual acts to how these representations produce sexuality *per se*. In the films examined below, sexual images are located in a space and time – filmically and perceptually – which is not constraining and fixed. Paradoxically, in their opposition to narrative, these films employ a device commonly found in visual pornography – the fragmented, static and depersonalised shot. However, through the meaning constructed in

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Gidal, 'On Finnegans Chin', *Undercut* 5, 1982, pp 21-22.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Wollheim, 'A Charismatic View of Pornography', *New York Review of Books*, February 7, 1980, vol 27 no 1.

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the articulation of shots together, there is a radical overturning of the pornographic structure, wherein we find both the ultimate denial of woman and her highest 'visibility' and also the most exotic and manic demand for a man to 'be a man'.

In recent years, a small group of film-makers associated with the British avant-garde have produced work that goes some way towards representing sexuality in film so that the result is not regressive, repressive or unnecessarily academic. The three film-makers to be discussed are Nicky Hamlyn (*Inside Out*, 1978, *Not To See Again*, 1980, *Anagram*, 1982); Deborah Lowensberg (*What Just For Me?*, 1979) and Will Milne (*Christ or Feathers*, 1976, *Same*, 1980). All these films either contain sexually explicit material or deal with sexual relations. What is notable about them is the extent to which they have certain characteristics, particularly formal strategies by which sexual imagery and themes are made possible without the regressive features which have dominated their medium.

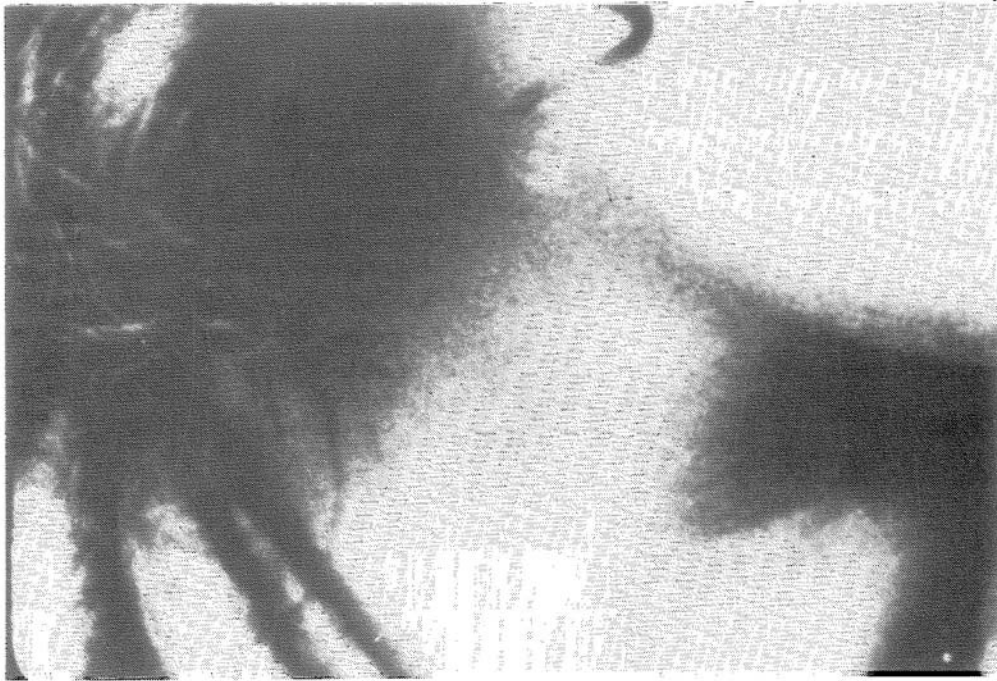
Firstly, all the films are what might be called anti-narrative if what is meant by that is that they do not tell a story or provoke our curiosity about the beliefs, desires and activities characteristically incorporated in a diegetic character. (Will X see Y naked? Will X sleep with Y and ruin her life? Will we see X and Y naked?—all the questions of narrative cinema...) On the other hand, Lowensberg's *What Just For Me?* does depict a relationship, but one constructed so as to make a narrative reading of it extremely difficult. Rather, it represents the emotional *shape* of a relationship between a man and a woman. This is achieved by connecting mainly static shots by long fades so that the film comprises a series of equally weighted shots each divided by a moment of darkness—isolating the shots and disturbing any desire to grant spatio-temporal coherence to the film in any strict classical sense. Although an impression persists that the events represented occur chronologically, this technique undermines that expectation while at the same time not completely dispensing with it.

This ambiguity is also present in Hamlyn's films. *Not To See Again*, as its title suggests, is a formal play on images. Here again the camera is mostly static, with shots fixed on an object or a part of a body fading in and out on each other, suggesting a place inhabited by the camera operator and those who appear, fragmented, in the film. Unlike Lowensberg's film however, Hamlyn's does not hint at a narrative. That is, there is no feeling of events being linked in time and space, but rather of objects and people being represented as somehow sharing what can only be called a personal space. Thus, one receives the impression of the existence of a spatio-temporal site without it being filmically constructed.

Hamlyn's *Anagram* and *Inside Out* are closer to Lowensberg's *What Just For Me?* in that they contain medium-shots of people, their faces shown and their voices heard, so that identifications are provoked that suggest human motivation, action and feelings. To this extent, narrative expectations are certainly put into play. However these moments do not fix the film in a narrative direction because of the concatenation of shots

of objects in close-up which saturate the potentially diegetic moments. In fact, it could be argued that this narrative straining in the film suggests some ambivalence in the film-maker's intentions and approach to the material.

Will Milne's *Christ or Feathers* is much closer to Hamlyn's films in its almost obsessive representations of objects and sections of rooms. (Gidal's influence marks all these films although only Hamlyn shares his formal concerns in any important way.) Similarly, Milne evades any narrative strength, merely hinting at lives, events and actions. For example, the sound track suggests a hospital, but no visual trace of this referent is present, at least for this viewer. A man and a woman lie on a bed, their heads out of shot, but any desire to project a relationship between them is subverted by the formal construction of the shot. In *Same* Milne moves much closer to representing a unified and coherent space and time but again the device of a static camera, short scenes punctuated by fades and leader, refuse any means by which a spectator could establish such a coherence. Nevertheless, the film's success depends in part on this tension between the series of shots as simply shots and a sketch of a story or an episode.



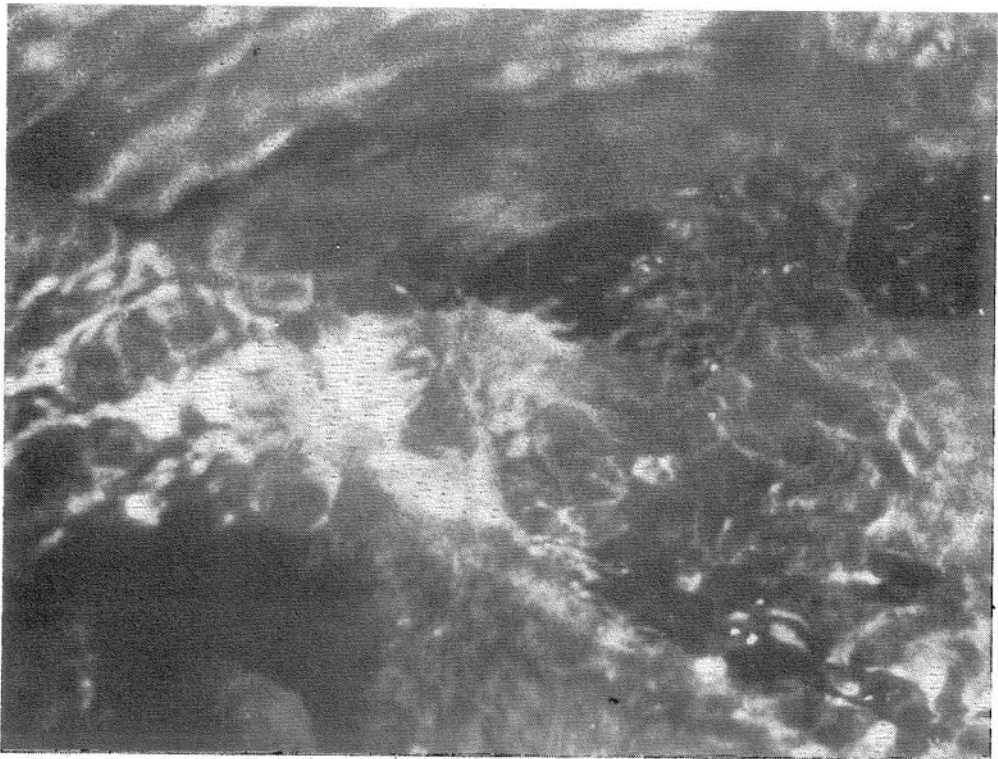
Frame still from *Christ or Feathers*, Will Milne, 1976.

If there is a certain ambiguity to these film-makers' anti-narrative methods, they also share the use of the close-up in order to render everyday objects, places and bodies ambiguous. Hamlyn's film *Guesswork* (1979) is centrally concerned with this device, hence the title. And in *Not*



*To See Again* he moves the camera in close to objects so that the screen is swamped by vibrant colour (a pulsating yellow at the beginning of the film) or textural qualities reminiscent of Minimalist paintings with their strong all-over colour. Using extreme rough-grain Hamlyn also achieves a swimming surface creating an illusion of depth in the painterly sense (an effect also employed by Milne). This abstract quality (never total, for the objects are always recognisable as objects) helps Hamlyn to negotiate sexual imagery as it occurs in the film by rendering those images relatively abstract and on a par almost with other objects depicted. Close-up, colour, shape, mass and texture subvert the meaning of the object, also rendering the naked body (male and female) almost abstract. The effect, of course, is to drain the image of its conventional sexual meanings and associations (with pornography, for instance), and instead neutralise it almost – *almost*, for what remains is a representation of sexuality which is not privileged in either an idealised way or an attacking, aggressive mode. It is simply there as an area of colour, light, movement, shape, texture – almost (again) the representation of the object shed of its conventional associations.

In one long held shot in *Not To See Again*, a torso (from beneath the chest and just above the genital area) fills the frame. As the shot is held, the spectator perceives the image in a gestalt-like fashion – at one moment as an abstract shape, then as an identifiable part of a body (whether male or

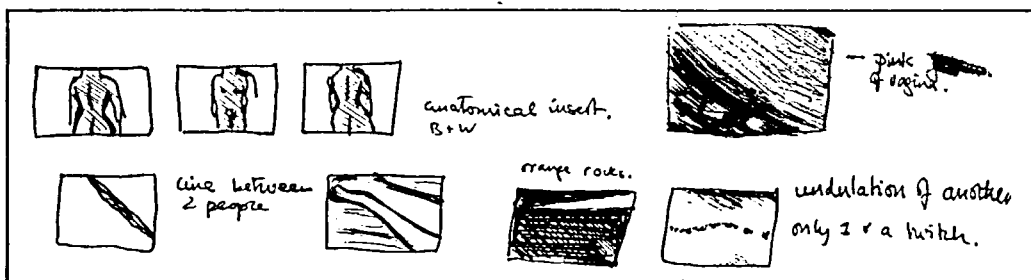


Frame still from *Not To See Again*, Nicky Hamlyn, 1980.

female is uncertain). At another point the camera, now moving erratically back and forth, presents a dully lit harsh-grained area of shadow, which after some time is recognisable as hair. Then, as the camera provides more clues, a penis is discernible. This movement from the formal aspects in frame to that of a specific sexual organ provides a route to the representation which is largely non-associative, so that the filmic process has determined an active mode of perception on the spectator's part. Awareness of film as process and material and the image itself as meaning, constructed in that process, is the dominant strategy here. To this extent, Hamlyn is still within the structural-materialist school of film-making.

In *Same*, Milne also works towards an ambiguity of the object by framing it to foreground formal aspects mainly relating to composition. A tight close-up reveals a volume of white, curved across the screen. When the viewer subsequently perceives an image of buttocks, the first assumption is of a female. But immediately one doubts this belief, aware of how much projection governed by cultural associations and expectations, is operative in this perception. A further shot in close-up of curved fingers gently moving in deep shadow immediately splits the spectator between a reading which is literal and a desire to read the image as that of a woman masturbating. The possibility of a 'literal' reading is cast into doubt, overdetermined by its position in a sequence of shots (we have already been made aware of the sexual theme of the film) in an effective and unsettling manner. Like Hamlyn's and Lowensberg's, Milne's films have a painterly quality in their stillness (filmic movement typically occurs between shots rather than within them) and their formal, abstract use of colour, mass, line, and shape. Rhythm is built up through scene concatenation (with fades and different coloured leader as a spacing and syntax) so that narrative is usurped by what might be called an emotional curve.

Similarly, in Lowensberg's *What Just For Me?*, whose narrative elements are stronger than in the other films (with the exception perhaps of Hamlyn's *Inside Out*), the 'relationship' between the man and woman comprises a series of short scenes often representing naked bodies, male and female, arranged in a formal aesthetic fashion. Additionally, there are scenes which might suggest that this relationship is breaking down (e.g. a high shot of the woman stretched naked on the bed: in the top right-hand corner of the frame a man is sitting naked in a chair, almost invisible due to the sexual power of the woman's image). In a more symbolic mode, a man faces the camera beside a woman with her back to the camera. The shot, in black and white and harshly lit, is suggestive of a morgue or 'mug' shot with a difference. (The spectator is also tempted to read the woman's back as that of the man who is facing the camera – the association is an odd one but strong.) The scene is strikingly similar in feel to Lowensberg's paintings where nude males and females are intertwined in such a way as to create a puzzle for the viewer as to whose bodies and limbs belong to whom. Thus, Lowensberg too works with a sexual imagery which is always erotic but ambiguous.



Working drawings for *What Just For Me?*, Deborah Lowensberg, 1979.

All three film-makers discussed here have used broadly similar strategies by which to represent such themes and images: an emphasis on the formal, abstract qualities of colour, shape and mass; the close-up and static camera; and a negotiation of the shadowy region between narrative and non-narrative (so that in Milne's *Same*, Lowensberg's *What Just For Me?* and Hamlyn's *Not To See Again* the result might be described as epiphenomenal). The use of domestic space in which to place this sexual imagery further denies the manic *mise-en-scène* of mainstream cinema in which sexuality is a means of control, triumph and contempt. The films achieve a representation of sexuality which does not psychologise it, over-dramatise it, idealise it, transform it into threatening and attacking modes, or alienate it. Instead it is merged with interiors (the equal weight of a sexual fragment with the shot of the corner of a room does not reduce one to the other but attends to them equally). Domestic interiors are very much represented as being *possessed* by their occupants in the sense of an intimacy and love and not one of utility and property. In this way, the sexual imagery of bodies, whole or fragmented, shares in that space of the personal – actively participating in its construction, rather than being constructed by it for narrative ends. Here objects and bodies are not simply psychologicistic or dramatic means to resolution.

To return to Stoke's observation, there is nothing exotic about the male here (at least its signs are less powerful and its strategies fundamentally questioned). All the films are literally quiet. No manic editing procedures operate and the image is always respected and never used casually for other ends. The film-makers' aesthetic is not some obsession with beauty (although there *is* much beauty in these films) but a mode of organising the sexual, the personal and film itself. In many ways, their work is an optimistic beginning to an independent cinema which may develop these areas without reducing them to the glossy, the pornographic and the narrative device.

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# FILM THEORY'S DETOUR

## TANIA MODLESKI EXPLORES MALE HOSTILITY IN EDGAR ULMER'S 'B' MOVIE.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Claire Pajakowska, 'Imagistic Representation and the Status of the Images in Pornography', *Ciné-Tracts* vol 3 no 3, Fall 1980, pp 21-22.

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<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', (trans) Annette Kuhn, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol 7 no 1, Autumn 1981, p 46.

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Lurie, 'The Construction of the "Castrated Woman" in Psychoanalysis and Cinema', *Discourse* 4, Winter 1981-82, pp 52-74.

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RECENTLY, FEMINIST FILM THEORISTS have begun to call for a displacement of the primacy of symbolic castration in film theory and in psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup> This call results from the frustration feminists have felt in embracing the Oedipal model of acculturation, which posits woman's perennial exclusion from the symbolic, consigning her forever to the pre-Oedipal stage of development. Woman, it is said, lacks lack. She does not possess a penis, and hence she lacks the means to symbolize lack (castration), the means, in other words, to enter into language and culture, according to the Lacanian model.

But this is certainly a strange formulation, as Hélène Cixous has pointed out. 'She lacks lack? Curious to put it in so contradictory, so extremely paradoxical a manner: she lacks lack. To say she lacks lack is also, after all, to say she doesn't miss lack . . . since she doesn't miss the lack of lack.'<sup>2</sup> Some feminists, seeing, with Cixous, that two negatives make a positive, have proposed an alternate schema to the one adopted by much current film theory. Susan Lurie argues, for example, that precisely because men fear the fullness and completeness of the mother, of woman, they need to mark her as castrated. The masculine hostility expressed in a film like *The Birds* stems not from the fear of woman's castrated state, but from the threat she poses in her *uncastrated* state. The birds themselves become the instrument of phallic revenge on woman's wholeness; they see to it that woman does in fact become the bearer of the wound.<sup>3</sup>

What follows is my attempt to explore further the nature and roots of masculine hostility toward the feminine as it is manifested in popular film. This hostility, I will argue, derives in part from conflicts that the male experiences toward the mother at the pre-Oedipal stage of development. I will be considering Edgar G Ulmer's 1945 'B' movie, *Detour*, which has achieved a certain cult status and is admired today even by practitioners and theorists of the avant-garde. Most of the crit-

ical praise of this film has been reserved for its visuals, while the script is usually heavily mocked. 'The story is beneath trash,' says Myron Meisel in an article significantly entitled 'Edgar G Ulmer: The Primacy of the Visual'. At the same time one senses a strong fascination with what is being repudiated, as Meisel goes on to characterise the story as 'an exercise in sustained perversity'.<sup>4</sup> My analysis, in displacing the primacy of symbolic castration, will also, inevitably, displace the 'primacy of the visual' (the 'scopic' regime on which castration relies). I will thus give equal weight to the script, recognizing it as a source of fascination and attempting to account for its compelling nature.

Raymond Bellour has, of course, been the chief, though by no means the sole, exponent of the Oedipal model of American cinema. Over and over he sees the same story repeated:

*It's the movement from the adventurer, lawless and faithless as we say in French (sans foi ni loi), to the husband, the future father and good citizen. (In this case we have a film with a 'happy ending.' But even films that 'turn out badly,' either because of internal tension within the couple or through a romantic idealization of the ill-starred lovers, are obviously complementary forms of the same problematic.)*<sup>5</sup>

According to Bellour, then, the happy ending is happy precisely insofar as it culminates in the hero's successful completion of the Oedipal trajectory. This thesis has not gone unchallenged. In an article on *The Band-*

<sup>4</sup> Myron Meisel, 'Edgar G Ulmer: The Primacy of the Visual', in *Kings of the B's*, (ed) Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, New York, E P Dutton, 1975, p 150.

<sup>5</sup> Janet Bergstrom, 'Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: Interview with Raymond Bellour', *Camera Obscura* 3/4, p 93.



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<sup>6</sup> Dana Polan, "'It could be Oedipus Rex': Denial and Difference in The Bandwagon", *Ciné-Tracts* 14, Summer-Fall 1981, p. 20.

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<sup>7</sup> Kaja Silverman, 'Kaspar Hauser's "Terrible Fall" into Narrative', *New German Critique* 24-25, Fall-Winter 1981-82, p. 79.

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware that current psychoanalysis attempts to deny the relationship of 'penis', a biological entity, and 'phallus', a symbolic construct. But I am fully persuaded by Mary Ann Doane's argument that these attempts have never been fully successful, nor can they be. See 'Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body', *October* 17, Summer 1981, pp. 23-36.

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wagon Dana Polan has persuasively argued that the film celebrates the triumphant defeat of Oedipus, vindicating the eternal boyishness of Tony Hunter over the representative of the Law who 'demands that Tony renounce rivalry and immaturity, and grow up castrated into a position of respectability'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, I would like to show that *Detour*, a film which 'turns out badly', derives its emotional force not, as Bellour would have it, from the hero's failure to accede to the symbolic, but from his failure to remain at the pre-Oedipal stage of development. All of which demonstrates the truth of Kaja Silverman's insight that 'the present social order in the West legislates not against Oedipal desires, but against the impulse not to be Oedipalized. This impulse is virtually synonymous with a refusal to be culturally subjected.'<sup>7</sup>

The implications of this remark strike me as far-reaching. For if it can be shown that popular films *themselves* work to displace the primacy of symbolic castration, then some of our work as feminist critics will have already been accomplished. This is certainly not to argue that an alternative model such as the one I am proposing (and I am not proposing it as *the* model for all of Hollywood cinema) will necessarily be one feminists can endorse. As we shall see in *Detour*, although the castration complex is not primary, the depiction of women and of male/female relations are about as bad as they could be in a '40s film. I would argue, however, that once we begin to locate the oppression of women elsewhere than in the castration complex (specifically, here, locating it in the early mother/child relation), then the burden is placed on history and social formations, which are susceptible to change, rather than on biology.<sup>8</sup>

In *Detour*, a film told in a series of flashbacks by the protagonist who is sitting in a roadside diner, Al Roberts' troubles begin when Sue, the blonde girl of his dreams, announces that she is going to Hollywood in order to improve her position in the world. The two have been working together in the Break of Dawn Club, he as a pianist, she as a singer. The name of the club itself is highly symbolic in a film obsessed with origins and the return to origins. When Sue tells Al of her intention to leave him, they have quit work for the night and are walking away in a dense, eerily lit fog, which gives us the sense that Al is beginning to lose his way (a sense further reinforced by several cutaway shots to the street sign, which we see but he does not). The sullen way in which he accepts Sue's announcement, his forlorn bearing as he walks slowly away after reluctantly kissing her goodnight, suggest a child being abandoned by its mother. There begins a movement diametrically opposed to Bellour's schema: Al goes from would-be husband and future father to lawless and faithless adventurer, as he takes his fatal cross-country journey to be reunited with the 'mother'.

While hitchhiking he is picked up by an older man, Charlie Haskell, who relates his past history: as an adolescent he had been involved in a duelling match with a friend, and after being wounded he had put the friend's eye out with his sword. Shortly after evoking his power to 'castrate', Haskell mysteriously dies, and for some reason Al is certain that everyone will accuse him of murder. So he takes the dead man's wallet,

assumes his identity, and proceeds on his journey in Haskell's car.

On the road he meets Vera, the bad 'dark' woman, who had previously ridden with Haskell and who now accuses Al of having murdered him. The classic spider woman, she has Al totally in her power, and she blackmails him into agreeing to sell the car and to hand the money over to her. In one of the script's less memorable exchanges, Al asks her how much money she wants, and Vera replies that she's not greedy, 'a hundred per cent'll do.' 'Fine,' says Al, 'I'm relieved. For a minute I thought you were going to take it all.' 'I don't want to be a hog,' Vera says. However, as we shall see, this depiction of the woman as limitless in her greed is crucial to the film work. The two rent a shabby apartment when they reach Hollywood, and Vera conceives a more grandiose plan: she reads in a newspaper that Charlie Haskell's wealthy father is dying, and she tries to push Al into posing as Charlie in order to cheat the old man. She even threatens to call the cops when Al resists the plan. By invoking the Law, Vera tries to force Al to accede to the position of the father, but, importantly, this accession is construed by the film as an act of fraudulence. Because Al tries to prevent her from contacting the police, Vera grabs the phone and runs into her room, locking the door behind her. Al pulls violently at the cord, unaware that the drunken Vera has gotten it tangled around her neck and that, as a consequence, he has strangled her.

The film ends with Al leaving the diner, while his voice-over protests his innocence. He leans against a post and lights a cigarette and then resumes walking. A dissolve shows him still walking, but without the cigarette, and the voice-over announces that we have been projected into future time. 'Someday a car will stop to pick me up that I never thumbed.' We see a police car stop and Al being taken into custody, the voice-over insisting on the unfairness involved in this supposed triumph of the law. 'Fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on me or you for no good reason at all.'

This is definitely not the trajecotry Bellour claims to be able to trace in almost every American film, a trajectory which involves the hero's 'entry into the social order and the internalized, finally bearable image of his own castration'.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Bellour's trajectory constitutes a detour named by the film's title, and Al resists being rerouted in the direction of the social order as he resists accepting the image of his own castration, which to him remains *unbearable*. But it is unbearable because it would deflect him from what we will see is his true destination: a return to the mother of the pre-Oedipal stage. This movement is signalled by the film's opening shot, which has the camera looking out of the rear window of a moving car: Al is trying to go forward to where he has once been. At a later moment in the film, Al is taking his turn at driving Haskell's car, and as he looks into the rear view mirror, the frame of the mirror enlarges, and there is a dissolve to Sue singing on a stage with the silhouettes of jazz musicians behind her. The frame remains canted at the precise angle of the mirror. The use of the rear view mirror to delineate Al's fantasy of Sue as she will appear to him in the future further points up the regressive nature of his journey.

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<sup>9</sup> Bergstrom op cit, p 93.

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<sup>10</sup> Bergstrom op cit, pp 92-93.

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<sup>11</sup> Melanie Klein, 'The Emotional Life of the Infant', in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1975, p 64.

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Thus, castration is certainly a threat in the film, but the primary anxiety centers around the feared lost unity with the mother. Accepting the image of one's castration would entail the definitive separation from the mother. Of course, in the film's terms, *not* accepting castration leads just as surely to separation. 'I can never go back to Sue with a thing like this hanging over my head,' the sepulchral voice-over informs us towards the end of the film. Such is Al Roberts' tragedy. He won't go forward and he can't go back. Thus he exists in a kind of limbo.

Now, Oedipal criticism would no doubt attempt to explain in terms of symbolic castration the 'splitting' of the female characters into the good/fair lady and the evil/dark lady. Bellour's analysis of this point in his discussion of *The Westerner* is characterised by a remarkable ease of interpretation. He speaks of 'the actress, a double image comprising both lawless sexuality and extreme idealization. . . . the woman as the very image of castration; and the heroine who reverses the image, through whom the masculine subject will find, in contrast, the positivity of a regulated sexuality and a measured idealization'.<sup>10</sup> But I would suggest that this model makes very little sense when applied to a film like *Detour* and that it is far more enlightening to view Al's relation to the women in pre-Oedipal terms.

In *Detour* the heroine's early abandonment of the hero may be seen to correspond to the child's unwelcome discovery that his mother has a life independent of his own. Psychoanalysis documents the impotent rage engendered in the child by this knowledge. Melanie Klein, who extensively studied the psychoanalysis of small children, tells us that the frustration experienced by the child at this stage gives rise to the paranoid position in which the child, unable to cope with his or her ambivalent feelings, projects them onto the mother. As a result, she is split into two, and from the child's point of view there develops an antithesis between the 'good breast' and the 'bad breast'. 'The frustrating (bad) object is felt to be a terrifying persecutor, the good breast tends to turn into the "ideal" breast which should fulfill the greedy desire for unlimited, immediate and everlasting gratification.'<sup>11</sup> Throughout the film Al clings to his idealised image of Sue, never once complaining of her betrayal. The idealisation of the character is marked by the fact that she is always 'seen from afar' (as when he tries to get through to her via the telephone) or in fantasy, as when in a canted frame and at a low angle she is pictured singing on stage with the silhouetted figures of jazz musicians behind her.

By contrast, Vera (played by the appropriately named Ann Savage) is one of the most ferocious persecutory femme fatales in the history of cinema. Her predatory nature is emphasised by the fact that she clawed up Charlie Haskell's arm ('I was tangling with the most dangerous animal in the world,' he says, 'a woman'). Moreover, she acts precisely like the stereotypical bad mother, continually claiming that Al needs her to take over his life because he is too stupid to get away with the masquerade on his own: 'I'm doing you a favor, helping you out of a jam and showing you how to make some money, and what *thanks* do I get?'

Finally, while Al sees himself as a nobly disinterested person, Vera exhibits a 'greedy desire for unlimited, immediate and everlasting gratification', a desire motivated in the film partly by the fact that she is near death. Vera, the 'bad object', may be seen to represent a projection of the male's own greedy impulses which are strenuously, too strenuously denied. ('Money. What was it?' I asked myself. 'A piece of paper crawling with germs.') For as Klein notes, 'Since the phantasied attacks on the objects are fundamentally influenced by greed, the fear of the object's greed, owing to projection, is an essential element in persecutory anxiety: the bad breast will devour him in the same greedy way as he desires to devour it.'<sup>12</sup> Vera's voraciousness is unbounded in every way, extending far beyond her attempts to extort all the money she can from Al. In their nights in the small, cheap apartment, where the two are masquerading as husband and wife (and in this way too the film posits the entry into the symbolic which marriage signals as fraud, deceit, pretence), Vera spends her time drinking bottles of whiskey, smoking packs of cigarettes, and badgering and belittling Al Roberts. Al participates in the drinking and smoking, but he is more moderate than she, never, for example, becoming outrageously drunk the way she does. The waning of the nights is marked by dissolves from a full bottle of whiskey to an empty bottle, from an empty ashtray to a full one, and in this way the film stresses the extraordinary oral quality of their relationship, as Al threatens to become sucked into Vera's devouring, all-consuming desires.

In *Detour*, the idea that Sue and Vera are linked as good mother and bad mother respectively is further suggested through the motif of the telephone. Twice, Al tries to contact Sue by telephoning her. The first time occurs right before he embarks on his journey. After Al gives the operator the number, Ulmer intercuts stock footage of a row of telephone operators at the switchboard and then a travelling shot of telephone poles and wires; the title on the soundtrack is the one Al associates with Sue, 'I Can't Believe That You're in Love with Me'. Significantly, we do not hear her speak and we are given only one very brief glimpse of her at the other end of the line, suggesting the frustration induced by this long-distance communication. The second phone call occurs while Vera and Al are locked up together in their apartment. Vera has gone to bed, and while Sue is saying hello into the receiver (this time we do not see her at all), Al glances at Vera's closed door and realizes that he can't make contact with Sue until he has somehow gotten free of the evil woman. He hangs up. Now, Ulmer has stressed the importance of adhering to a single viewpoint throughout a film,<sup>13</sup> so it is highly interesting that while Al is busy with the phone, Ulmer cuts to a shot of Vera flinging her shoes across her room in a rage of thwarted sexual desire because Al has just rejected her advances. In a sense, however, Ulmer is not violating his own dictum, for Vera, as bad object, may act out the childish fury which is inadmissible in our hero, who at this moment is placed in a frustrating situation vis-à-vis the idealised object.

It is altogether appropriate that Vera dies by telephone after she slams the door on Al, an act which parallels the earlier rejection by Sue. All the

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<sup>12</sup> Klein op cit, p 64.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Never switch from the boy to the girl, because the screen cannot tell two stories at the same time.'

Peter Bogdanovich, 'Interview with Edgar G Ulmer', in *Kings of the B's*, p 408.

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rage which he never showed when Sue left or when his attempts to get through to her were aborted now explodes, and he pulls the cord towards him as the camera pans down from his contorted face to a close-up of his straining hands. The act of destruction is simultaneously an act of pulling the woman towards him: a fitting end to a violently played out *fort/da* game initiated by the 'mother's' desertion.

When Al breaks into Vera's room to discover that he has inadvertently strangled her, he sees her first, as do we, in the mirror. Given the fact that we have analysed the function of the bad woman as a projection of the male's own bad impulses, this image of the woman in the mirror is highly significant. We recall that when Al fantasied joining Sue in Hollywood, the fantasy was contained in a mirror (the rear view mirror). Now, when he has committed the act which will separate him definitively from Sue, we see the embodiment and the result of his own hostile impulses precisely where they belong: in the mirror. *Detour* is remarkable for the clarity with which it demonstrates the truth that in Hollywood cinema women are often nothing but mirror-projections of male fears and male fantasies.

But – and we cannot stress this enough – these fears and fantasies have less to do with castration anxiety than with the deeper fears of women's independence, self-sufficiency, and wholeness, and of the anger and greed stimulated in the male by the spectre of female autonomy. It seems to me that the functioning of the women in many Hollywood films, and perhaps most especially in the *film noirs*, can be analysed in light of the paranoid mechanisms outlined here. Thus, for instance, 'the intricate patterns of double cross and sexual mobility'<sup>14</sup> exhibited by the femme fatale in the *noir* genre would be feared because they continually evoke the original betrayal of the mother and the helpless rage engendered in the child by this betrayal. And if in many films the hero and, by identification, the spectator so frequently settle for a 'regulated sexuality', it is partly because the domesticated woman offers a guarantee of utter faithfulness: she promises never to abandon her man.

This analysis has the merit of beginning to account psychoanalytically for the strong element of paranoia in this film and others of the *noir* genre. In *Detour*, the paranoia of the hero is no different in kind from that of other *noir* heroes, but it is more extreme in degree – so extreme, in fact, that it very nearly threatens to expose the projective mechanism on which it relies. The narrative 'explanations' of the deaths of Haskell and Vera, meant to allay any suspicions of the hero's guilt and to place the blame squarely on a malicious fate, are so overdetermined that, logically, they seem to cancel each other out. For example, in Vera's case, the reasoning goes something like this: I didn't want her to die; I wasn't responsible for killing her; nevertheless, she deserved to die; and, besides, she was going to die soon anyway.

The hero's paranoia is so great that at points in the film it nearly calls into question the film's status as history.<sup>15</sup> For the rhetorical questions Al addresses to the spectator at the beginning of the film ('Did you ever want to forget anything? Did you ever want to cut out a piece of your memory, etc.?) which insure an untroubled audience identification

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Alloway, *Violent America: The Movies 1946-1964*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1971, p 50.

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<sup>15</sup> Editor's note: here 'history' refers to *histoire*, impersonal enunciation, rather than the personal *discours*, as the source of the film's address. See Christian Metz, 'History/ Discourse: Notes on Two Voyeurisms', *Edinburgh Magazine* no 1, 1976.

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turn, at moments of extreme agitation, into a direct and hostile attack on the spectator, who is *assumed to be incredulous*. After Haskell's death, Al tells us he knows what we are going to say and as his panic mounts he tells us he can see 'that "don't-make-me-laugh" expression on your smug faces'. The complex process of cinematic relay, by which the spectator identifies with an innocent hero and projects his own sadistic desires onto the persecutory screen figures, threatens to break down because the spectator himself is treated as a persecutor by the hero.

And no doubt we *are* persecutors of the cinema, for it may be that, in the words of Jean-Louis Baudry, the cinema functions as the site of an 'archaic mode of identification, which has to do with the lack of differentiation between the subject and his environment, a dream-scene model which we find in the baby/breast relationship'.<sup>16</sup> Baudry, of course, does not explore the greed, anger and sadism to which this identification potentially gives rise, feelings which are evoked, manipulated, and allayed by the narratives projected on this primal screen. It is obviously difficult to admit to possessing a 'greedy desire for unlimited, immediate and everlasting gratification'; it is less ignoble to admit to castration anxiety, to the fear that one might wind up lacking—like a woman. Indeed, the very ease with which film critics and theorists uncover the workings of disavowal both in cinematic narratives and in the cinematic experience, the very eagerness with which they proclaim its primacy should make us suspect a cover-up, an important repression. What is repressed, what is always repressed (though never quite enough) is the possibility of woman's independence, her completeness.

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, 'The Apparatus', *Camera Obscura* 1, p 120.

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# JAMES M CAIN AND FILM NOIR

A REPLY TO FRANK KRUTNIK  
BY STEVE JENKINS.

Frank Krutnik's article on James M Cain in *Screen*<sup>1</sup> begins with an assertion about 'renewed interest' in this writer's work. We are told that 'the success of Paramount's 1981 adaptation of Cain's most famous book *The Postman Always Rings Twice* has generated further activity in film'. *Body Heat*, *The Butterfly* and a TV mini-series based on *Past All Dishonor* are then cited as direct results of this success. It is immediately puzzling that no evidence is presented to clarify or support this claim. Also, to then state that Cain's writings have 'largely been ignored by Hollywood since the cycle of Cain-adaptations in the mid-40s' (referring to *Double Indemnity*, *Mildred Pierce* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*) is to contradict the filmography accompanying the article, which actually shows a fairly steady flow during Hollywood's 'classic' period – four Cain adaptations between 1934 and 1940, four during the 40s and four in the 50s.

What's at stake with these oversimplifications and misrepresentations of both Hollywood production (why certain films are made at particular times) and of James M Cain's relation to classic American cinema is the perpetuation of a popular memory: 'the writer is chiefly remembered for his influence upon *film noir*, and indeed the recent screen versions play upon Cain's 'Hollywood image' fixed through the *film noir* adaptations'. But in terms of the 'Cain-text' this image/memory can be seen as very misleading and unhelpful, as I suggested in a brief article in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*<sup>2</sup>. In order to bind Cain into the history of *film noir* you have to repress numerous significant aspects of his work. You have to label, as Krutnik does, certain works as 'typical' and 'influential', and others as 'deviant'. By a sleight of hand you dismiss the 'apparent diversity' of Cain's work in favour of a 'core (with) a consistent generative

problematic'. But this diversity is not 'apparent', it is actual.

The Cain-text, like most authorially defined bodies of work (or genres), develops through an interaction of similarity and difference. If the critical method at work privileges the similarity, then the risk of counter-productive reductionism is high. For example, according to Krutnik, 'In the Cain-text, the narrative disruption is desire itself, manifested through the hero's reaction to the body of the woman (via) the first-person narration which dominates.' The woman is located as 'the objectified "other" (and) the hero is immediately engulfed by an aggressive desire which is itself desired by the woman, who literally requests the sexual violence'. As in the following opening passage: 'From the way her buttocks looked under the black silk dress, I knew she'd be good in bed. The silk was tight and under it the muscles worked slow and easy ... those are things I like in a woman. I put down my bags and went after her.' And later: 'I got the idea. I ripped the shirt off her, she fighting all the time and liking it. I ripped at her clothes, not caring how much I hurt her. There was blood on her mouth. I don't know if it was mine or hers. It tasted sweet. Suddenly she stopped moving. "Now", she said. "Now, goddam you. Now!" Later we lay on the floor.'

Q.E.D. Except that the quotes are not from Cain but from *Solomon's Vineyard* (1941), a novel by another 'hard boiled' writer and author of several *noir* screenplays, Jonathan Latimer. Whether the close correspondence between the supposed structural base of the Cain-text and this section of the Latimer-text is a matter of coincidence, theft or parody is beside the point. But if the coherence of the Cain-text can only be established by reducing it to a hard-boiled Oedipal blueprint, then one might justifiably ask: why Cain?

This question seems to hover unanswered over the article and the stated intention to account for the 'processes involved in the adaptation of this "Cain-text" to American film' merely begs it. What we get is a psychoanalytic reading of

<sup>1</sup> 'Desire, Transgression and James M Cain', *Screen* May-June 1982, vol 23 no 1, pp 31-44.

<sup>2</sup> 'James M Cain: A Career in Another Key', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1981, vol 48 no 568, p 112.

selected novels, for which purpose Cain himself is selected (i.e. privileged) in traditional lit-crit fashion – because of his ‘influence’ and ‘a particular coherence in its (his work’s) organisation of pleasure and production of meaning’ – at the expense of any useful contextualisation of his work (except for the information that he ‘was a highly successful popular writer’). The analyses of *Double Indemnity* and *Mildred Pierce* which follow in effect provide the context by default (they repeat the truism that Cain is a seminal figure in the *noir* field), but then add very little to the similar accounts of these films by, respectively, Claire Johnston and Pam Cook in *Women and Film Noir*<sup>3</sup>.

This apart, if the purpose of the analyses is to suggest ‘the problems involved in adapting Cain’s work to 40s Hollywood film’, then how does this square with the simultaneous promotion of the writer as a ‘shaping influence on the whole *noir* tradition’ (Albert J LaValley<sup>4</sup>, quoted by Krutnik)? With *Mildred Pierce* we are told that ‘the film transforms the novel’s narrative considerably . . . introducing a murder not in the book, organising much more suspense, and contextualising the melodrama material that dominates the novel within a framing *film noir* structure both narratively and stylistically’. But how does this transform ‘an aberrant Cain book into a much more Cain-like film’, when the only reference point for grasping the latter is the adaptation of *Double Indemnity*? What of the other seventeen films in the final list of adaptations, and the numerous novels and stories not discussed? The web formed by these filmic and literary texts, if one wishes to link them by invoking Cain’s name in order to produce the image of a ‘Cain-like film’, must be more complex, if usefully decipherable at all, than Krutnik suggests.

The other side of this coin is to query the ‘unique’ status accorded *Double Indemnity* (the film). The article effectively presents a history

which, to quote the sub-heading, follows ‘fiction into film noir’. According to this history, one can trace a line from the novel *Double Indemnity* through its filmic adaptation to a whole ‘narrative mode significantly different from the investigative mood often seen as definitive of *film noir*’. The Cain-mode supposedly replaces a murder and its investigation with a primary interest in sexuality, linked with ‘violence and disorder’ and a ‘precarious hero’. But other *films noirs* released during 1944 and early 1945, and the novels on which they were based, seem to blur this distinction. *Laura*, for example, contains a perfect example of the precarious hero in Dana Andrews’ cop, Mark McPherson, whose fetishistic obsession with a dead woman clearly links him to the film’s ostensible villain, Waldo Lydecker. And in Vera Caspary’s source novel, Lydecker himself voices a firm opinion on the two modes in question: ‘The literature of murder investigation bores me as profoundly as its practice irritated Mark McPherson. Yet I am bound to tell this story, just as he was obliged to continue his searches, out of a deep emotional involvement in the case of Laura Hunt. I offer the narrative, not so much as a detective yarn as a love story.’ In addition, the novel not only invokes the ‘confessional structure’ (‘I am bound to tell this story’) linked by Krutnik to the Cain-text, but also plays on the notion of ‘loss of control in the telling of the story’ (seen by Krutnik as characteristic of the *film Double Indemnity*) by containing three separate first-person narrations.

*Woman in the Window* disguises/represses (and thus stresses) the confessional element by postponing the revelation of the narrative as the protagonist’s dream until the climax. At the same time, it ‘parodies’ the investigative mode by having the ‘murderer’, Professor Wanley, retrace his own trail, one step ahead of the police whom he is ostensibly accompanying on *their* investigation. And the source novel, *Once Off Guard* by J H Wallis, makes the precarious hero/sexual threat connection perfectly clear from the first page: ‘there’s no end to the necessity of being on guard. There’s no let-up to it as long as you live, if you want to be safe . . . There’s the sex urge too – always threatening, threatening. Look out for the women – dangerous, always dangerous . . . “Traps and pitfalls everywhere”, said Wanley. There was a touch of bitterness in his tone.’

<sup>3</sup> Pam Cook, ‘Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*’ and Claire Johnston, ‘*Double Indemnity*’ in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *Women and Film Noir*, London, British Film Institute, 1980, pp 68-82 and 100-111.

<sup>4</sup> Albert J LaValley (ed), *Mildred Pierce* (script and commentary), University of Wisconsin Press, 1980, p 13.

Even if one looks at an example of what Krutnik particularly cites as representative of the investigative mode, i.e. 'the film-adaptations of Raymond Chandler's novels', things are by no means clear-cut. *Murder My Sweet (Farewell My Lovely)*, as described in Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *Film Noir*<sup>5</sup>, seems to shade into the Cain-mode in several respects. The 'lapsed hero' becomes a 'doubtful sort of protagonist'; the 'dense fatalism' becomes a 'closed system'; the 'confessional structure' is apparent as 'Marlowe begins to tell his story... in flashback.' And while it may not stress 'sexuality from the start', the film's component parts ('the use of the *femme fatale*... the motivation of violence... a disordered and ominous world beyond control') aren't a million miles from 'sexuality that is inextricably related to violence and disorder'.

In other words, the distinction between *Double Indemnity*/the Cain-mode and other, simultaneously produced, examples of *film noir* (and their literary origins) seems at least problematic. Rather than Cain vs. the rest, one might posit a spectrum across which boundaries become blurred. And in order to investigate this area, one would need to abandon the canonisation which singles out, in a sense makes critically 'respectable', figures like Cain. As it stands, the attempt to write film history in terms of such figures and their influence seems uneasily hung between traditional privileging (accounting for 'the "Cain-text" [in isolation] as

an already worked-out, already signifying textual system with a particular coherence') and a more general, but insufficiently developed, line on the process by which classic American cinema coped with pre-existing literary models.

A further example might be pertinent here. Also released in 1944 was *Phantom Lady*, based on a novel by Cornell Woolrich. Tom Milne has pointed out that 'Between 1942 and 1950, the heyday of the *film noir* in Hollywood, no fewer than 15 films were adapted from Woolrich originals',<sup>6</sup> and Foster Hirsch, in his book *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*, suggests that while 'Hammett Chandler, Cain and (Horace) McCoy wrote novels that inspired some of the most highly acclaimed *films noirs*... (Woolrich is) the writer whose sensibility is most deeply *noir*'.<sup>7</sup> So, was Cain more 'influential' than Woolrich? Certainly the latter's work (dark, obsessive, often deliriously overwritten) is stylistically closer to the various formal and structural 'excesses' of *noir* than what Krutnik calls the 'swift, unstoppable and linear' movement of Cain's hard-boiled prose. This is not a matter of substituting Woolrich for Cain, but of opening up an interesting and unwritten history which Frank Krutnik's article, with its stress on a single literary figure and concomitant emphasis on linear cause and effect, succeeds in closing off.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward (eds), *Film Noir*, Woodstock, NY, The Overlook Press, 1979, p 192.

<sup>6</sup> 'The 1000 Eyes of Cornell Woolrich', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1978, vol 45 no 532, p 108.

<sup>7</sup> Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*, London, Tantivy Press, 1981, p 43.



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# PROJECTIONS ON PAPER

FILM POSTER GRAFFITI

PHOTOGRAPHED

BY MIKE HUGHES.

INTRODUCTION BY MANDY MERCK

83

'Posters were, and are today, a primary means of advertising the Hollywood product,' Mary Beth Haralovich's recent *Screen* article<sup>1</sup> reminded us. In the platforms and corridors of London's underground, posters hawk everything from magazines to mouthwash, including European art cinema and British television programmes. Much of this medium is displayed at tantalisingly close range – the slogans eye high, the figures lifesize or larger, the surface absorbent paper, undefended by glass or perspex. The maximum penalty for its 'defacement' (an unusually apposite term in the context of routinely inscribed moustaches and blackened teeth) is currently £50, although this writer got away with a tenner's costs and a £15 fine on a first offence.

Haralovich argues, after Barthes<sup>2</sup>, for a close relation between poster and product in film advertising:

*The attributes of the Hollywood film which are clearly transmitted in posters are: the title of the film, its stars, character traits, and the narrative enigmas in which the characters function.*<sup>3</sup>

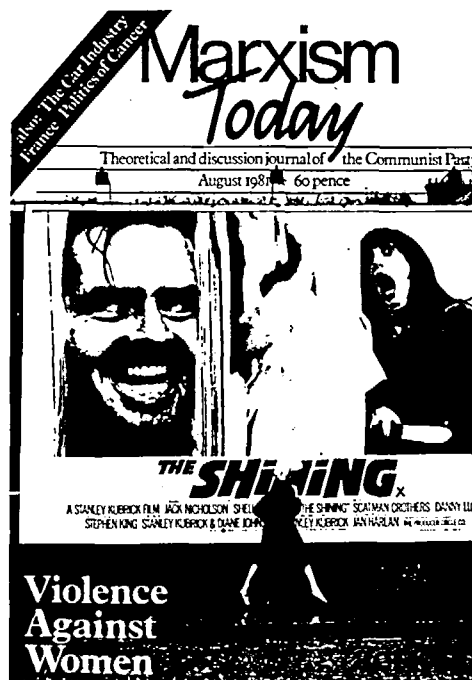
And in the '30s and '40s Warner Brothers posters she surveyed, image, design and text do seem to offer efficient correlatives for the romantic scenarios advertised. No 'Trades Description problems here!

<sup>1</sup> Mary Beth Haralovich, 'Advertising Heterosexuality', *Screen* July-August 1982, vol 23 no 2, p 50.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image, Music, Text* trans Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p 33.

<sup>3</sup> Haralovich, op cit, p 52.

But what are we to make of the disjunctures presented by a subsequent generation of advertisements – for example, the British poster for *The Shining* much criticised by feminists? Although reportedly approved by director Kubrick, this oddly scaled mad slasher montage seems wildly inappropriate to the relatively low tide of terror in that film. (A graphic featuring the movie's central motif, the box hedge labyrinth, would offer a very different – and disarming – reading.) If film posters (or indeed film publicity in general) sometimes produce meanings different from those suggested by a synoptic account of plot and character, from whence do those meanings derive?







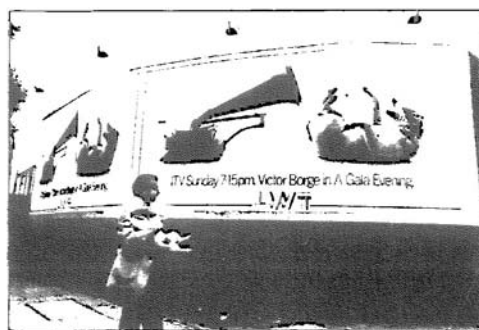
In an attempt at explanation, Sue Clayton and I juxtaposed *The Shining* poster with other advertisements and promotional stills for arguably very different films like *Dressed to Kill* and *He Knows You're Alone*. (The idea was actually borrowed from popular press articles linking these films with the recent Peter Sutcliffe 'Ripper' murders.) The sequence revealed such extensively shared attributes as to suggest a new genre—if not in the films' narratives or thematics, at least on (poster) paper.<sup>4</sup>

A subsequent analysis of a 1980 German poster contest for *Dressed to Kill* developed this distinction by specifying the general characteristics of the medium:

*Posters advertise films; but what is it that is being advertised? The chief function of posters is to introduce and popularise the title of a film. They also advertise performances and appearances by particular stars—'Angie Dickinson in...'...In addition to recalling past pleasures and popularity, posters indicate the kind of film an audience can expect. This can mean relating the film to a familiar genre, for instance horror or suspense thriller, or to a more recent critically constituted grouping—women's films or those of 'obvious nastiness' to women.<sup>5</sup>*

John Ellis's new study furthers this inquiry by elaborating the requirements of advertising single fictions for sale outside the home without

—literally—giving too much away. ('Too much' is pre-eminently the resolution of a broadly narrative enigma offered by elements like slogans and titles—*Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*—although Universal's recent withdrawal of pre-release colour transparencies of the title figure in *ET* suggests other aspects.) Conversely, Ellis argues, advertisements of TV programmes are designed to solicit the errant attention of an already presumed domestic audience viewing familiar formats for free. Here the emphasis switches from enigma to variety, 'a perpetual introduction of novelty on the basis of repetition which never reaches a final conclusion'.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, this freedom from narrativity offers considerable scope for the barely relevant visual puns (see illustration) and political lampoons (unseen speaker to male smoker perched at end of Royal four-poster: 'No, we are not Game for a Laugh') employed by the current poster series for London Weekend Television.



<sup>4</sup> 'Obvious Nastiness', *Spare Rib*, number 106, May 1981, pp 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Bryant and Griselda Pollock, 'Window Dressing—a Poster Competition for *Dressed to Kill*', *Framework* 15-16-17, 1981, p 25.

<sup>6</sup> John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p 160.

Unlike such TV advertising, film posters develop a 'narrative image' proposing, in Ellis's terms, 'a certain area of investigation which the film will carry out'. This image may be constructed through brand identification (stars, studio, director, genre and the new self-referentiality of the blockbuster title as marketable logo) in combination with title (*Alien*), slogan ('In Space No One Can Hear You Scream'), and graphic (a sinister ovoid subject suspended menacingly over a grid which rather resembles the audience in a darkened cinema). Here their non-coalescence is deliberate, gesturing 'toward various elements or directions (horror/space/birth/nature/helplessness etc); they do not allow them to fall together into a single enunciation, a synopsis of the film. Hence the enigma offered by the narrative image is that of how the various elements do indeed coalesce'.<sup>7</sup>

Or, as the *Dressed to Kill* study concludes:

*Ultimately the usefulness of the poster is its power to attract rather than its power to inform. It operates similarly to most advertising which aims to construct pleasure for a viewer and mobilise that pleasure as the desire of a consumer.*<sup>8</sup>

Which brings us to the second part of our inquiry, those who read – and write on – film posters. At present, advertising graffiti is enjoying a boom. In Sydney, the BUGA UP (Billboard-Utilising Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions) organisation has altered enough alcohol and cigarette hoardings to furnish a series of seasonal catalogues. In New York, no surface of the city's subway trains has been left uncovered by the giant 3-D signatures of assorted aerosol artists, whose monumental attempts at redefining public/private space distinctions have somehow survived the transition to Manhattan's uptown galleries (and now London's ICA). In Britain, Routledge and Kegan Paul have just published photographer Jill Posener's collection of political graffiti, *Spray It Loud*.

Like other commentators on the subject, Posener sees such graffiti as attempts to wrest both space and meaning from private ownership:

*I have one feminist friend who reckons that the advertisers have colonised our very streets – literally*<sup>9</sup>.

*Hoardings are a one-way lecture. Graffiti creates two-way communication.*<sup>10</sup>

*At some stage all space in the street becomes buyable and paid for, every inch a commodity; communication becomes a province of the economically powerful.*<sup>11</sup>

*Graffiti is the individual appropriation of public space. There is a desire to create space for oneself – to give space to the individual's projections and fantasies. 'Space' describes both the state of mind of hallucination and the limit of fantasy in the concrete walls of the city.*<sup>12</sup>

This appropriation is accomplished not by removing or obscuring the advertisement, but by altering it or adding to it, forcing 'the original communication to act against itself, to render itself useless'.<sup>13</sup>

These metaphors – of subversion, trespass, reclamation – particularly suit explicitly 'political' graffiti, written – as the introduction to *Spray It Loud* puts it – by 'women and men committed to some form of social change'. Interestingly, that book includes no graffiti from cinema advertising, and it's difficult to imagine how most of the following images could be accommodated within its pages. With certain notable exceptions (*The German Sisters*, *The Blue Lagoon*) the posters which Mike Hughes photographed are insistently inscribed with sexual – indeed genital – rhetoric traditionally identified with schoolboys.

It may be premature to conclude that this is precisely the sort of reaction film advertising is designed to elicit. (Photographs of adjacent surfaces would reveal whether penises were drawn on everything within reach.) Still, it's tempting to regard each graffiti as a direct response to the poster it's written on (although

<sup>9</sup> Jill Posener, quoted in the *Guardian*, October 16, 1982, p 11.

<sup>10</sup> Jill Posener, *Spray It Loud*, p 11.

<sup>11</sup> Janek Alexander, 'Bought Your Weekend Cottage Yet?', *ZG* no 6.

<sup>12</sup> Atlanta and Alexander,

'Wild Style: Graffiti Painting', *ZG* no 6.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, op cit.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis, op cit, p 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> Bryant and Pollock, op cit, p 28.

DATE OF CONVICTION	OFFENCE		£		Time Allowed For Payment
18-12-81	Deface poster	FINE	15	-	<del>14 days</del> 28 days
		COMPENSATION COSTS	10	-	
		TOTAL	25	-	
		LESS PAID			
JJ/CTII	008297/S53	BALANCE	25	-	

You were recently convicted by the Magistrates' Court sitting at Clerkenwell. Above are shown the date of the offence, the amount you were ordered to pay, and the time within which you should make payment.

some – 'This Poster Degrades Men's Nipples' – take the opportunity to refer elsewhere, in this case to feminist graffiti.) Should we read the recurrent phallic imagery as an interesting corroboration to theories of cinematic fetishism? Or join in celebrating spontaneous acts of sexual demystification?

*The signs are literally on the wall as angry kids annotate adverts and posters, usually superimposing on them the sexist messages that the admen sought to disguise, and deface the printed notices to passengers on buses and tubes to produce no-nonsense instructions on polymorphous perverse fun and games.<sup>14</sup>*

Such an anti-censorship interpretation would suggest that this sort of graffiti underlines, rather than subverts, the sponsor's message. Or is the very act of making such meanings explicit itself subversive?

All posters on London Transport premises are subject to a fourteen-point list of conditions, including prohibitions on the 'politically controversial', offence to racial or religious groups and criminal incitement. Film advertisers are particularly cautioned against advertising 'films which have not been granted permission for public exhibition or which do not show the certificate, except when the name of the cinema is not shown'. And their attention is further 'drawn to the fact that advertisements depicting murder, scenes of terror, horror or acts of violence will come under special scrutiny'.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, in an issue of this journal concerned with censorship and pornography, it's interesting to note that London Transport may refuse advertisements both on the grounds of intrinsically obscene content ('if they depict or refer to indecency or obscenity') and public offence. The latter condition seems an appropriate point at which to examine the following photographs, as it expressly forbids advertisements 'likely to offend the general travelling public on account of the nature of the product or services being advertised or because of the working or design of the advertisement, or the possibility of its defacement'.

<sup>14</sup> Michele Roberts, '1981 in Review: Poetry', *City Limits*, January 1-7 1982, p 38.

<sup>15</sup> A fuller account of film advertising censorship appears in James Ferman, 'Censorship Today', *Films Illustrated*, volume 9, number 89, 1979, p 62-67.



She taught him everything she knew  
- about passion and murder.

# BODY HEAT<sup>x</sup>



"BODY HEAT" WILLIAM HURT KATHLEEN TURNER  
and RICHARD CRENNAN Written and Directed by LAWRENCE KASDAN  
Produced by FRED T. GALLO PANAVISION<sup>®</sup> TECHNICOLOR

A LADD COMPANY RELEASE



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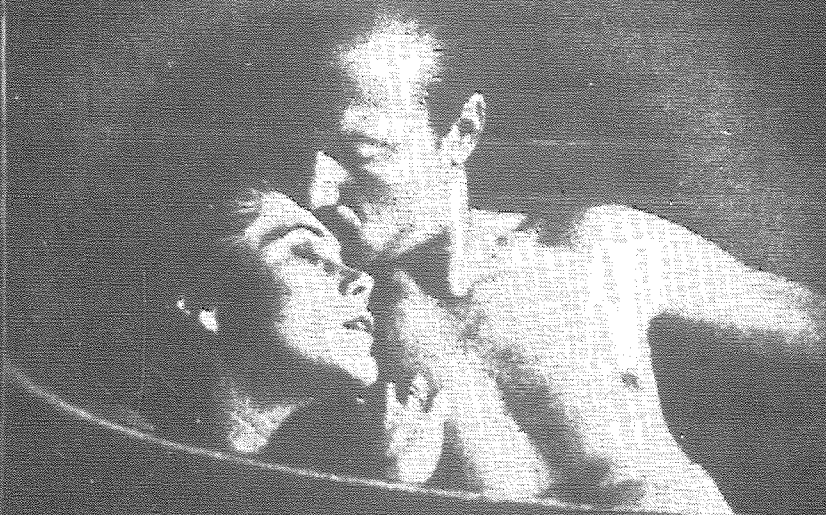
**IN THE WEST END FROM THURS. JAN. 21  
AND ALL OVER LONDON FROM SUN. FEB. 7**



She taught him everything she knew  
- about passion and murder.

not  
very  
much

# BODY HEAT<sup>X</sup>



"BODY HEAT" WILLIAM HURT KATHLEEN TURNER  
and RICHARD CRONNA Written and Directed by LAWRENCE KASDAN  
Produced by FRED T. GALLO PANAVISION TECHNICOLOR

ATLANTIC COMPANY RELEASE



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**IN THE WEST END FROM THURS. JAN. 21  
AND ALL OVER LONDON FROM SUN. FEB. 7**



chilling, bold, mesmerizing  
futuristic detective thriller



HARRISON FORD  
**BLADE RUNNER**



# COLUMBIA



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Two children shipwrecked alone  
on a tropical island.

Nature is kind.

They thrive on the bounty  
of jungle and lagoon.

The boy grows tall.

The girl beautiful.

They swim naked over coral reefs.

They run in a cathedral of trees.

And the warm winds,

the tropic moon, the silk

sand conspire to enchant them.

When their love happens,

it is as natural as the sea,

and as powerful.

Love as nature intended it to be.

THIS IS A BLIND  
OF LIES, "NATURAL"  
LOVE/SEX DOES NO

NECESSARILY HAVE  
TO BE MALE + FEMALE  
NOR DOES IT NEED TRADIT-

IONAL PATTERNS OF

MALE POWER AND  
DOMINANCE. NO

MATTER WHAT THIS

FILM SAYS.

# GOON

AA

IN FILM

TOPHER ATKINS

Director of Photography: NESTOR ALMENTRO

Editor: JIM FARRINGTON, RANDAL KLEINER

Music by

Production

Design

Costume

Makeup

Hair

Transportation

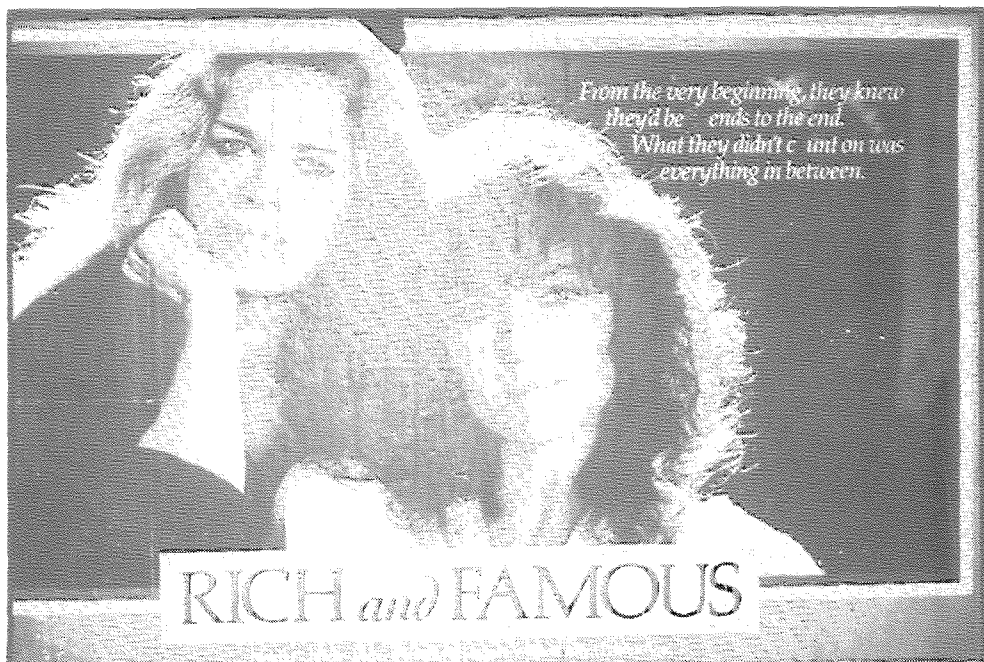
Production Office

Production Office

Production Office

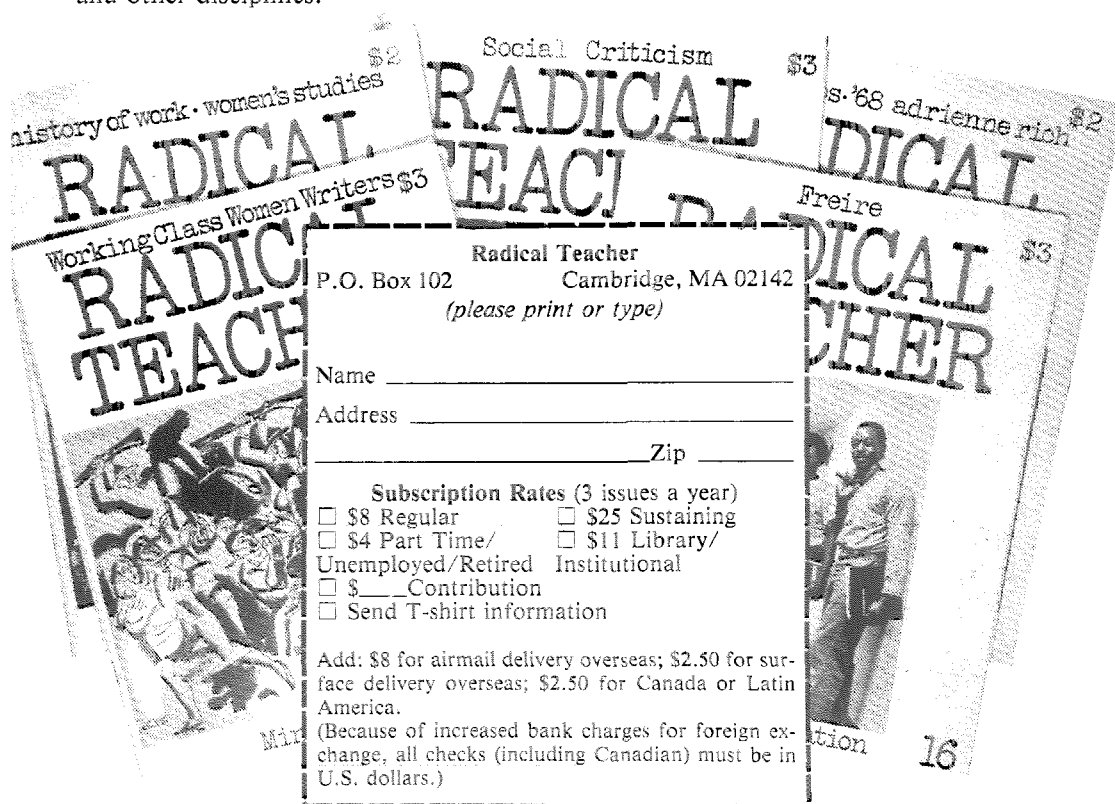
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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

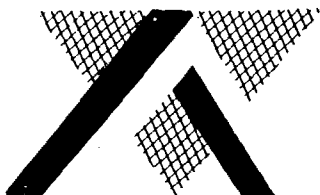
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## CORRECTION

On Page 84 of our September/October issue (23.3/4), Robert Doisneau's photograph 'Un Regard Oblique' was reproduced courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Warner Communications Inc. Purchase Fund (1981. 1199). *Screen* wishes to apologise for the editorial omission of this acknowledgement.

# SCREEN

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# 1983

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